

GameOn

3.COM - ISSUE 75

STAR WARS
BATTLEFRONT

**NEED FOR
SPEED**™

JUST CAUSE 3

HALO 5
GUARDIANS



ASSASSIN'S
—CREED—
SYNDICATE

INSIDE
26 REVIEWS
3 PREVIEWS
& 6 ARTICLES





Welcome to issue #75 of the GameOn Magazine! It's the holiday season once again, and our thermostat is on 'Roast' to combat the foul weather.

We've had to cut down on articles this month, which is why we only have Ben talking about villains, Dom explaining the recent Paris Games Week, and my thoughts on PlayStation trophies. We also added in the introduction into a new ongoing segment on Red Faction.

What's taking up the space usually occupied by articles? I'm glad you asked! We have a preview on XCom 2, as well as an interview with Firaxis about it!

Tucked in between those are previews for Indivisible and Matt's look at sphereFACE.



We have 28 reviews taking up the rest of the space in this mag, featuring some of the biggest releases over the past month, as well as a bunch of indies, and the odd title we didn't get to feature last month. Cat played through Sir! I'd Like to Report a Bug, Ben M. had a go at 200% Mixed Juice!, Alex finished the season of Game of Thrones with Episode 6 as well as putting some hours into Football Manager 2016, VodKa had a go at Kingdom, SOMA and The Park, Ben R. played the DLC Old Hunters for Bloodborne, and I played Tales of Zestiria. Steven blew things up in Just Cause 3, and finally, Calum played through Halo 5: Guardians and Star Wars Battlefront.

That's just a couple of handfuls of our many reviews, so we'll see you in the new year with our January 2016 issue! Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year from the GameOn staff!

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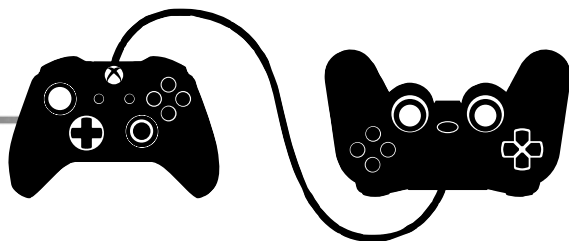


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So I Tried... Pixel Piracy

Andrew visits the virtual 2D high seas

By Andrew Duncan



Each edition of So I Tried... I will try a game that I have never tried before. Will I find something new to love? Will I find something

new to despise? I'll take a full half hour, no matter how bad it gets or how badly I do, to see if this is the game for

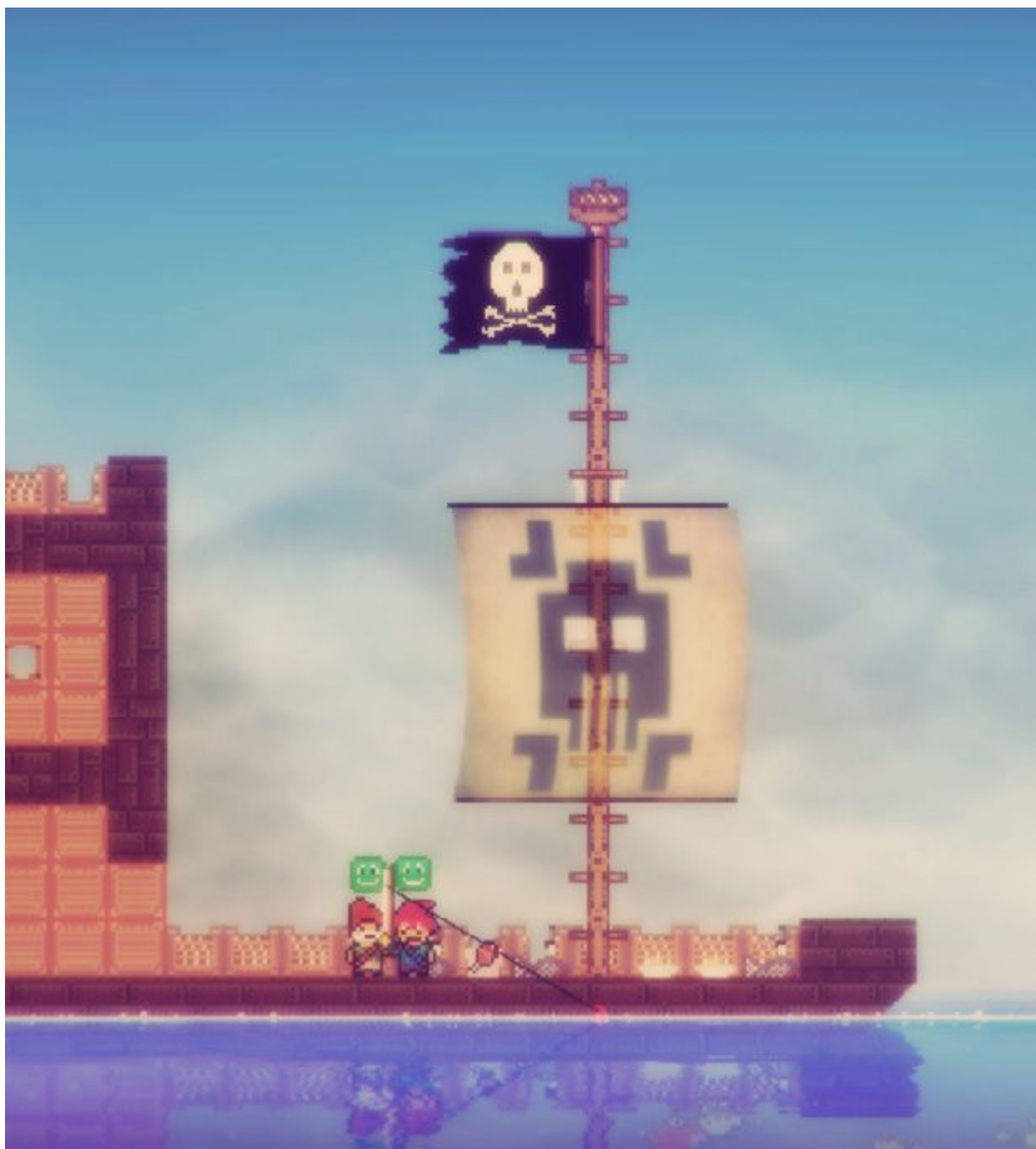
me. This time I went for the PC version of Pixel Piracy.

What I thought it was

A side-scrolling pirating game with pixel graphics. Roam the slightly large seas in search of booty and people to stab in a 2D environment. Pillage, rape, maim, steal and pirate! Yes, I be usin' that word as a verb now, matey!

What it actually is

Certainly 2D pixelated pirates, not so much the violence. You're given a ship and a crewman, then after a character creator and very brief tutorial you're on your own. You're tasked to kill the most dangerous pirates on the seas, so you can claim the rank of... most dangerous pirate on the seas. You move





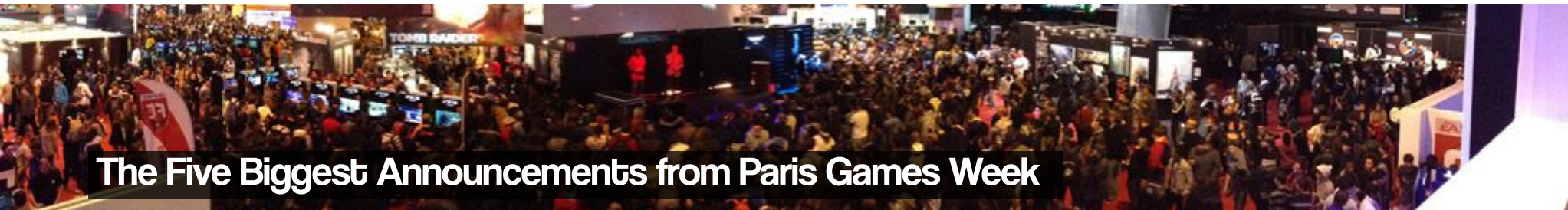
from square to square on the map, finding loot and killing those who oppose you when you get there. I thought there would be more sailing involved, but it really is as simple as double clicking on where you want to go. There are random encounters as you sail, but generally you go ashore to towns for supplies and bounties, whilst trying to find your quarry. It's a roguelike, though you can

reload the game if you do die, which adds a little urgency to the fights. Go with a cutlass up against two pirates with guns or crossbows: you're going to want to run away or reload the game — or get ready to start again.

Will I keep playing

It's certainly piqued my interest. The half hour went much quicker than usual, and I want

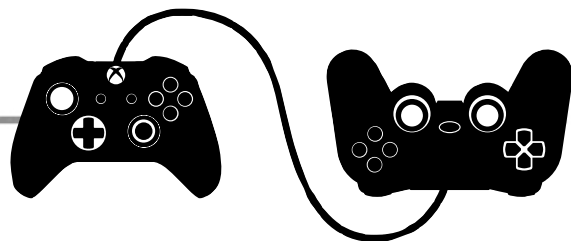
to continue with my second pirate. I just upgraded the boat with some tall walls and am eager to find out what that does, if anything. I also want to save up for some cannons and have a ship battle, if that turns out to be a thing. I think it might be a case of grappling over to the enemy boat and stabbing them all, but I do want to see what happens. ■



The Five Biggest Announcements from Paris Games Week

Dom walks us through the biggest things coming out of PGW

By Dom D'Angelillo



Welcome to Paris, gamers. A city notorious for its art galleries, constantly bustling cafes and now, its games week. Here's our top five announcements from the PlayStation press conference last month- On with the show.

No Man's Sky Release Date

June 2016

No Man's Sky, despite being shown in small chunks here and there, is the conductor of

one of the largest and most passionate hype trains to ever depart announcement station. An infinite universe to explore, worlds to find and creatures to name, it all sounds like the ultimate version of an grown-up Minecraft with a sci-fi twist. Rumours had begun circulating a few weeks before the PGW





conference that it would be available following the show, Amazon users had received dispatch emails with estimated dates of late October/early November, but this looks like an error on the e-commerce giant's front. No surprise release, but another beautiful trailer with an inspired voice over showed off more obscure planets and intergalactic travel. And when can we play I hear you ask? June 2016.

A New Gran Turismo

VR Supported

Breaking away from numbering their games, Polyphony Digital took to the stage in Paris to

announce the seventh core Gran Turismo title, officially titled Gran Turismo Sport. Complete with a soothing soundtrack, the reveal trailer was the ultimate collection of shiny, angular car porn. Concept cars, racing cars, everyday cars, the usual mixture of four-wheeled beauty was on display but of particular poignancy was the mention of the online modes. The usual suspects return, but two modes, the national championship and the manufacturer championship will take place from the get go and aside from bragging rights, the overall winner will earn a place at the FIA awards ceremony where there accolation will be lauded in

the same room filled with F1 drivers and the like. What's more, Kazunori Yamauchi also declared that Gran Turismo Sport would have VR support, details were scarce but a 360° view for wannabe racing drivers is a dream come true.

More VR Games Announced

A large chunk of the press conference was dedicated to the recently named PlayStation VR, rammed down our throat to the point of suffocation the upcoming VR release is being span in the same circles as a new console launch which means we're getting game announcement after game

The Five Biggest Announcements from Paris Games Week

announcement. Pick of the bunch was the Until Dawn spinoff Until Dawn Rush of Blood, an on-rails shooter set in on an abandoned rollercoaster which looks to have people pooping their pants relatively frequently. Also shown was the mech esport RIGS, a remake of the wireframe tank-shooter Battlezone, and a futuristic adventure with a dinosaur twist called Robinson: The Journey. All look to offer unique experiences, but whether they will be closer to a complete game or a small package to show off to your mates still remains to be seen. There's still plenty of twists and turns in the life of VR to come.

Quantic Dream Announce New PS4 Exclusive

Titled Detroit: Become Human

Remember that tech demo from a couple of years ago? That one from Quantic Dream called Kara showing a robot gain consciousness in a vast android factory? Well, now it's an official game and QD's first foray onto the PlayStation 4, following last gen's outings; Heavy Rain and Beyond Two Souls. Titled

Detroit: Become Human, details are still few and far between but it looks to be another cinematic filled, masterfully crafted game following an android as she comes self aware. An AI uprising perhaps?

Fighters are **in** once again

With a new Street Fighter and Tekken

Console exclusive fighter Street Fighter V took up a huge chunk of the press conference in Paris. Not only did we get a release date of 16th February 2016, but

we also got official confirmation of the final two launch characters, returning yoga-like fighter Dhalsim, and newcomer Laura who combines Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu with electricity... because videogames. But that wasn't it. Confirming that fighters are back in Tekken 7, the upcoming addition to the iconic PlayStation series will be coming onto PlayStation 4 following its arcade launch and acts as a prequel to the narrative, following the story of Heihachi and his family woes. Oh, and this one is VR compatible too... don't ask. ■





Short Thought: Trophy Hunting / Trophy Avoiding

Andrew ponders on Trophies

By Andrew Duncan



It could never be said that I'm a Trophy or Achievement-hunter. I don't go out of my way to kill x amount of enemies, I've rarely collected every flashing object, and side quests get left on the sidelines all the time.

But I noticed something recently whilst playing the PS4 version of Saints Row IV. If you don't know, the PlayStation 4 tells you the percentage of people who have played the game and have each Trophy. It then gives it a rating from Common to Ultra Rare. So, imagine my surprise when I was browsing my Trophy's and noticed that only 94.4% of people have Zero Saints Thirty.

Since I've played and completed SRIV a few times on PS3, I of course knew exactly what gives you that Trophy. It's not parachuting from



Short Thought: Trophy Hunting / Trophy Avoiding

10,000 feet, you don't have to nutshot eight hundred enemies, and the collectibles aren't even available then.

So what unlocks it? What have almost six percent of people, who have loaded up the game at least once, failed to do? Complete the first mission.

If you're completely unfamiliar with the Saints Row series, the last two numbered entries have given you a mission to do as soon as you start the game -- acting like the cold open of a Bond movie, a bunch of action to get you pumped. This means that you haven't even created a character by the point that you unlock that Trophy.

Who plays a game for less time than it takes to reach the opening credits? The cold open climaxes with The Boss (player character) leaping onto an ICBM and trying to disarm it mid-flight, in fact this is the entire opening mission -- did someone start it up, get partway through and say "Meh, I don't care where this is going."?

I looked it up on Steam and only 66.0% have it (as of the middle of November), which is more

understandable at least. As a purely digital platform, it doesn't take into account the fact that people haven't even installed it. It's been in a couple of bundles, so anyone who has it registered to their account is counted.

As many as 99% of Xbox gamers have the achievement. That's still not perfect, because my question still stands: "Who hasn't gotten this far?"

This isn't the first time I've seen a Trophy that has made me ask that, but it is the first that has left me gobsmacked. I've experienced the utter smugness of seeing an Ultra Rare Trophy pop up, though as I've said it's not something I chase. Seeing a Common that is so easy to get, not at 100%, is simply baffling.

Of course the figure may change between me spotting that, and writing this. I was playing Fallout 4 and got a Trophy for levelling up or something. I hit the PS button to check it out and saw 49.5%. Then it refreshed and hit 51.5%. So the figures are live, not updated weekly or anything.

Shortly after writing this, I began Sword Art Online: Lost Song. You do the tutorial and get a Trophy -- 97.1%. You then walk across the street, watch a cutscene followed by the opening credits -- 95.5%.

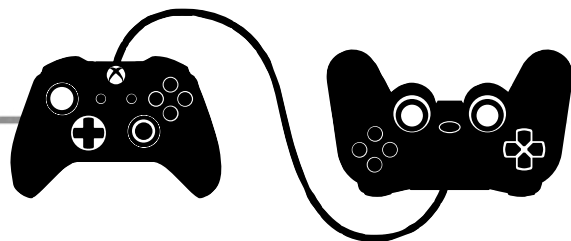
Is it possible that there are players that, unlike myself or Trophy Hunters, go out of their way to avoid achievements? ■



Just Let Our Villains Be Villains

Ben explains why gaming's bad guys don't have to represent reality

By Ben McCurry



Earlier on this week, I stumbled upon a polarising tweet from Tauriq Moosa on the game that's proved a landmark success for the industry, *Fallout 4*. The 4th main instalment of the series has garnered high praise, earning an 8.5/10 from us, and 85/100 across all reviewers on Metacritic for the PC version. It's the hot game of the minute

in that everyone seems to be loving it, yet, to go back to the tweet at hand, Moosa seems to be less than satisfied with one key part of the game's direction.

In the tweet, Moosa supposes that *Fallout 4* is "disappointing" for the fact that villain NPCs will shout gendered insults towards the player character,

such as the aforementioned "Hey, little girl!". As I do so often on the internet these days, and more so as time goes on, I rolled my eyes, sighed, and tutted for a good few seconds like an old English biddy.

Mr Moosa is right and wrong; if he were totally and completely wrong, his tweet would not be as frustrating. The fact is





the villains do make use of these gendered slurs, but the idea that the appearance of them in the fictional world of Fallout 4 is a negative thing is just opinion. In the real world, sexual harassment and violence is abhorrent, and should never be tolerated under any circumstances. Yet, as this is a work of fiction, I can't agree so readily. In fiction, acts of heroism and villainy can be exaggerated to inspire a stronger reaction from the viewer/reader/player; this relates to fiction having a stronger, better defined

dichotomy of good and evil, whereas in reality, people are more neutral. As such, the gendered slurs can add context and characterisation to a fictionalised work, while also creating a stronger message and lesson on them.

These 'gendered insults' are a success in this game. We come into Fallout 4 or Tomb Raider or Fantasy World Dizzy with notions of what is "acceptable" and "unacceptable" in real life, and this helps to inform our reading of the game and its characters. If we come into

Fallout 4 knowing it's morally wrong to shout a word like "bitch" at a woman we don't know on the street, we'll probably know it's wrong in a videogame as well. Imagine this; let's say someone less informed is playing the game. Let's say they're 10, and they've gotten ahold of the game from a sibling or a less-than-vigilant parent. They're 10, so they don't know much about gender politics. They're more impressionable. As long as Fallout characterises its characters properly, there's still no problem. If this 10 year old doesn't know why gendered

Just Let Our Villains Be Villains

insults might be wrong, they'll quickly make the association through the game. A character is coming towards us, shooting us and looking to cause a quick game over – must be a bad guy, right? The child will know he's a villain based on those actions. If the villain were to use, say, racial slurs in his assault, his actions and words couple together. The villain uses racial slurs. Nobody else does, especially the heroic character, who finds them disgusting. There's a clear message of racial slurs = villainous there.

In the same way, in the real version of Fallout 4, the message is that gendered insults = villainous as they're employed by, you know, villains and not the heroic protagonists. This works in the fiction of Fallout and indeed any other game, because we come into the experience knowing it's not okay, and even if we don't, it's coded in such a way to make it clear. Plus, the insults add to the atmosphere of the apocalypse; anarchy will be running wild, and with no social mores to keep them in line, covert sexists and racists are more likely to come out of the woodwork, bringing their





language with them. Granted, who uses this language within the text is just as important, but it's key to creating a miserable, daunting atmosphere.

Now, of course, the issue of catcalling is serious, and its reproduction in digital form will probably hit a bit too close to home for many people. It follows the same vein of thinking that tells us that topics like rape and sexual assault should be handled with tact in media. This is true, but we have to again consider Fallout 4, or even just the franchise itself for a minute. The main character, male or female, is

usually armed to the teeth and primed to take out enemies. Any mook that tries to come at you is going to die, no matter what they say. This would be different if your player character possessed no strength, if the sexism was glorified, and the villain never got their comeuppance, but here? Even if there's no way to verbally retort (which, admittedly, would have been a cool gimmick), shots fired into the face of the villain is as good a rejoinder as any. You wouldn't tolerate it in the real world; don't accept to hear it in the digital one. And yes, that creates the question: "why even put people like that

in the game to begin with?". The sad reality is that, for the time being, sexism deeply penetrates culture, and to steal a line from the oft-vaunted Warner Bros. disclaimer, to not include some representation of that in the game would be to pretend those prejudices don't exist, especially considering the time frame of Fallout.

To take this one step further on villain representation, let's look at professional wrestling for a second, where the divide between good guys and bad guys couldn't be clearer. Actions and events show the audience whether a character is a good

Just Let Our Villains Be Villains

guy or a bad guy. “Macho Man” Randy Savage was loud, colourful, did flashy impressive moves, and entered the ring to the patriotic-sounding Pomp and Circumstance – easily a good guy. In contrast, take someone like “The Million Dollar Man” Ted DiBiase. His character was arrogant, rude, loved to flaunt his money in front of the (majority) working-class fans, stuffed his opponent’s mouths with bills as a sort of final insult, and – cannot stress this enough – he had an African-American slave called Virgil. Nobody’s looking at DiBiase in the fiction of 1980s wrestling and thinking, “Man, what a stand-up guy!”, except for perhaps neo-Nazis and white supremacists, who, importantly,

bring their prejudices in the door with them.

Choices inform characters. The Bethesda writers don’t sit around a table eating pizza and jacking off; their scripts are often intelligently and purposefully written. Representation is no accident, and to make some mook villains in the game be leering and perverted towards female player characters is a solid narrative choice. It would definitely be questionable if someone such as Nathan Drake popped off language like that to Elena Fisher, because he’s presented as the consummate smiling, charming good guy in a world of scumbag villains. But among the likes of Dimitri

Rascalov or Frank Tenpenny, it makes perfect sense, as their bigotry informs their villainy.

Yes, sexual harassment is terrible. Yes, representation matters. But to say that the appearance of it in media is “disappointing” seems extremely limiting, as if we can’t even talk about it or dissect it further. As such, complaints of that nature from Moosa seem quite myopic. In short, the idea that this makes for bad media is disheartening. The representation of women in videogames has never been purely positive, but this is the wrong thing to get angry about. Just let villains be villains. ■





Red Faction Diaries Introduction

The opening chapter of a look through Red Faction

By Andrew Duncan



I've long been a fan of the Red Faction franchise, mainly for the Geo-Mod physics engine Volition created for it. It's always bothered me that games aren't filled with destructible levels, despite how far technology has progressed

since the PlayStation 2. Now and then you get a game which attempts it, with certain objects or the odd building responding to an explosion in some minor way, but you can never use a rocket launcher to tunnel

around a group of enemies, or literally pull down a building on them. Unless it's in the story.

And so, with four games in the series available on Steam, I'm going to play through Red Faction in





release order, and write about my experience. Themes explored, references carried through them, characters that appear... All that good stuff.

For those unfamiliar, Red Faction takes place on Mars for the most part. The world is basically run by the Ultor Corporation, meaning that most of the workers of 2075 are employees of theirs. The mining operation that they run is seen as a way to escape the shackles of Earth and get some money -- however, it's not as

easy as that. Once on-planet, workers are worked to death: sometimes quite literally. It has given rise to an underground group known as the Red Faction - a rebel group that you find yourself affiliated with.

Hopefully I can also find out why Guerrilla and Armageddon sold so poorly that THQ put an end to the franchise -- before it ultimately put an end to them. With the rights to Red Faction now in the hands of Nordic Games, it has been a few years since the last title. Perhaps

by the time I reach the end of Armageddon, there will be a new title announcement...

Starting Red Faction, we're introduced to Parker, who came to Mars seeking a better life. Or, at least, one away from Earth for whatever reason. He completes his induction to the Red Faction with some weapons training, and explanations of how doors and medics work. The guy chatting to me explains how Ultor are terrible, and the rebels are about to rebel -- but I have to be ready... ■

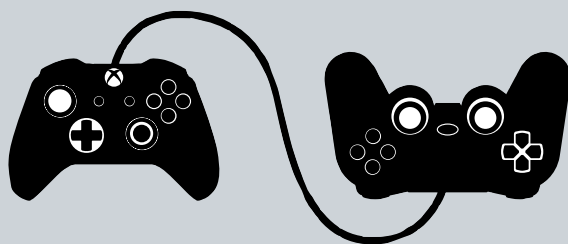
Indivisible Preview

Publisher: 505 Games

Developer: Lab Zero Games

Genre: Action

Platform: PC, PS4



Release Dates

2017

By Andrew Duncan



Created by the people behind Skullgirls, and very different from that, Indivisible is currently being crowdfunded by Lab Zero Games. They have two Prototype builds of the game, which are available on Windows, Mac and Linux here (and on Steam) as well as one on PlayStation 4, available here.

Indivisible is a metroidvania style game, which means progressing by upgrading and backtracking to bypass things you couldn't before. Find a hammer to smash rock, locate an axe to cut vines -- that sort of thing. It's 2D and largely hand drawn, giving it a very stylized look. At the moment the characters and enemies

don't really mesh seamlessly with the backdrops, but that is likely to change over the next couple of years before they release the proper game.

You control Anja and eventually joined by three other people: Zebei, Tungar and Razmi -- as she explores some ruins, chasing her pet. Of course, it's full of monsters, so you have to fight them. As it's still a demo, there's no reason for them to join you, other than the fact the game says they joined you: but that's not important as there will eventually be 27 characters.

Battles are fairly simple to comprehend, but difficult to master. Each of the four characters is commanded using one of the buttons on the controller, and annoyingly changes depending on which way you were facing when





the battle began. You have to wait for each gauge to fill, reminiscent of Final Fantasy VII's Active Time Battle system, and each character eventually upgrades from only being able to attack once, to attacking three times. Rather than give you a list of commands, pressing the button will make the character do an attack. However, if you hold a direction and press the same button, it will do a different attack.

Then there are special attacks, which differ from character to character. Healing or attacking, they cannot be performed

without the special gauge at the top of the screen filling. It fills slightly for successful attacks, and a lot faster for a successful defence, which gives you an even bigger reason to block than preserving health. Since the special gauge is fairly easy to fill, it can get you out of a tight spot if you need it.

The metroidvania aspect is only explored a little in the Prototype, with the first thing you collect being an axe for Anja. It lets you cut through vines blocking the way, as well as climb up walls by swinging it into the wall and using it to

leap up higher. It does well to show off what is to come in the full 30-hour adventure, which will have at least a handful of extra weapons.

It won't take long to play through, with less than an hour of gameplay, but it is definitely worth playing. It's free to download as mentioned at the start of this piece, and might just convince you to contribute to the crowdfund campaign.

Indivisible is due for release in 2017 on PC and PS4, following the end of their Indiegogo campaign. ■

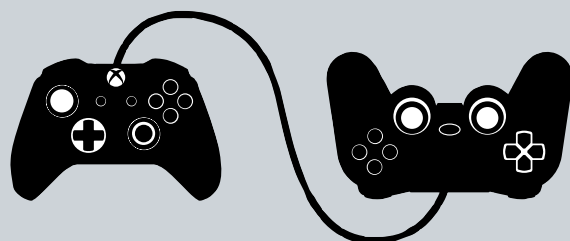
sphereFACE Preview

Publisher: VoxelStorm

Developer: VoxelStorm

Genre: Action

Platform: PC



Release Dates

TBA

By Matt Wilhelm

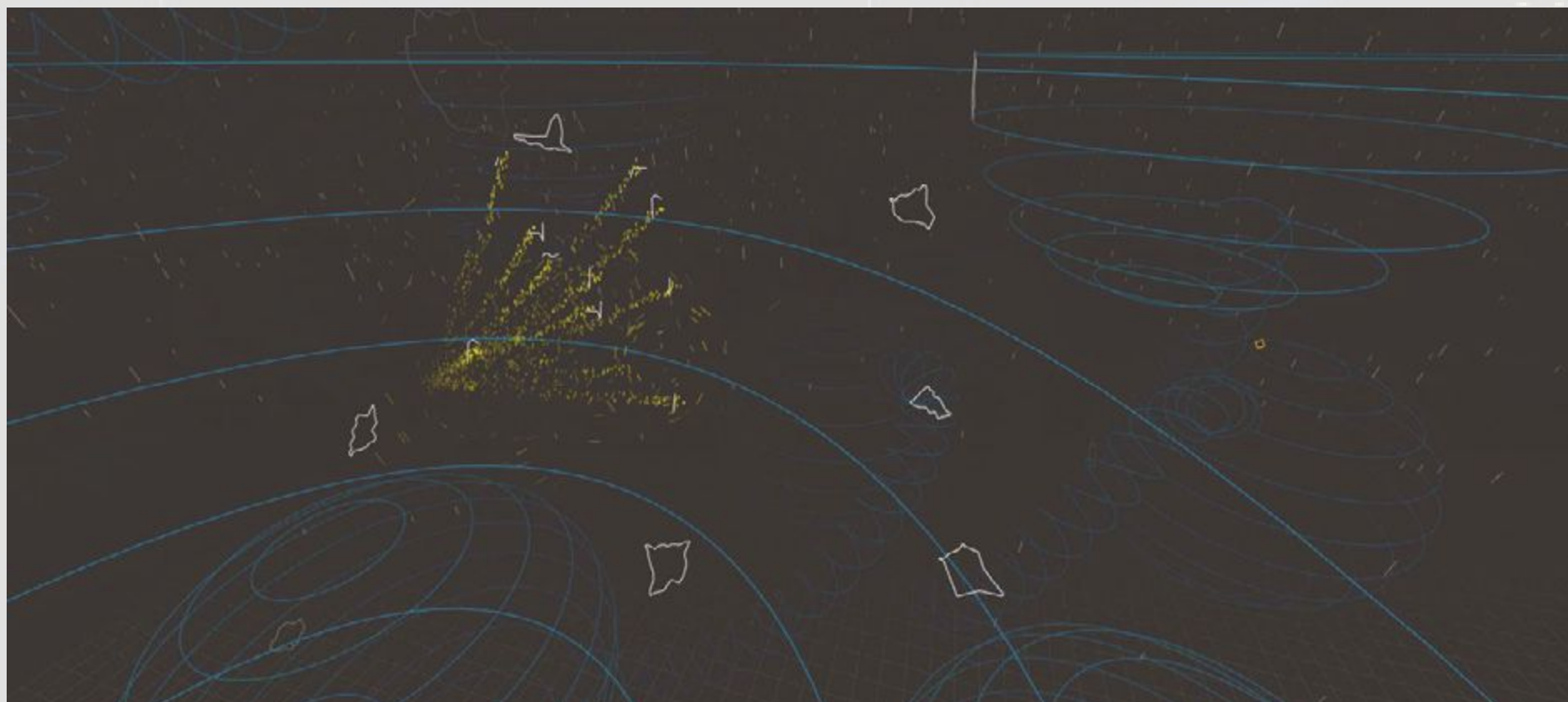


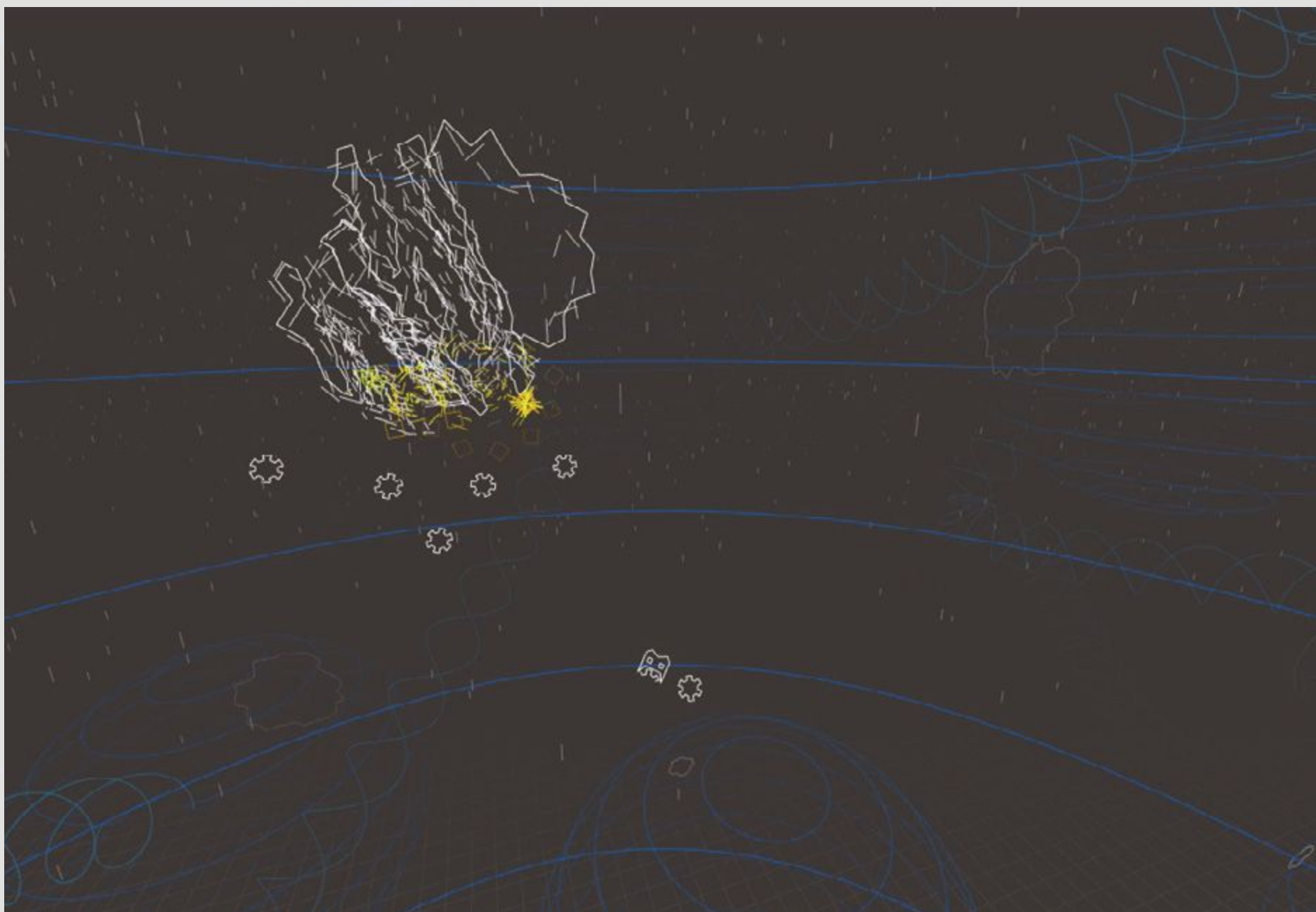
Although some of our childhood favorites should not have their gameplay changed, sphereFACE has managed to take our beloved Asteroids and add an interesting twist to it. SphereFACE is an abstract shooter that takes the idea of the classic Asteroids and brings it to the third dimension and puts on the nitro.

The game involves moving your ship through what is technically a curved 2D space, however it is no easy feat. Instead of a flat map you are instead tasked with navigating a sphere-like arena filled with enemy ships and asteroids. The way asteroids break apart will test your reflexes you will have little time to see what's coming your way. The inside of the sphere that your ship is trapped in, is

relatively small; however, you could actually build up enough speed to the point where you no longer see your ship, which is exactly what happened to me.

While the asteroids are hard enough to deal with, you also have enemies flying around shooting projectiles at you. Even if these shots miss, they can come full circle and hit you from behind which makes the





game extremely difficult. Your end goal is to destroy all of the asteroids in your current sphere so that a pathway opens up that will transport you to the next sphere/level.

The controls are actually kind of difficult to get used to, even though they are the standard WASD movement keys. Unfortunately, once you get going your only way of slowing down or going the other way is to lose all momentum by turning your ship right around. This will take some

practice as it is a matter of learning to properly balance your ship's speed and control.

This is one of those games where pausing the screen shows just how easy everything should be, however unpausing the game changes everything. The game is easy to learn but nearly impossible to master. I found myself repeatedly dying on the first sphere alone and even after completing that I found myself being challenged in the same way by the second sphere.

As of right now sphereFACE has the main elements of what could make for a great game. The concept of remaking a classic arcade game into something new, yet familiar at the same time is no easy thing to do, however VoxelStorm has managed to do it extremely well. The game feels like classic Asteroids with a great twist to it, you will have to be faster and more aware of your surroundings to survive this game. ■

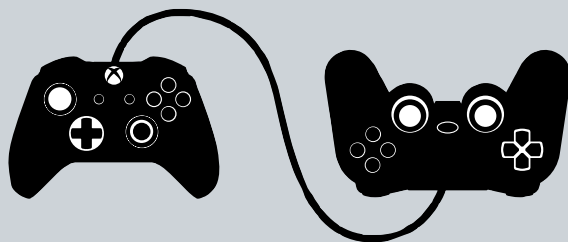
XCOM 2 gamescom Preview

Publisher: 2K Games

Developer: Feral Interactive

Genre: Turn-Based Strategy

Platform: PC



Release Dates

February 5th 2016 (Worldwide)

By Reece Armstrong



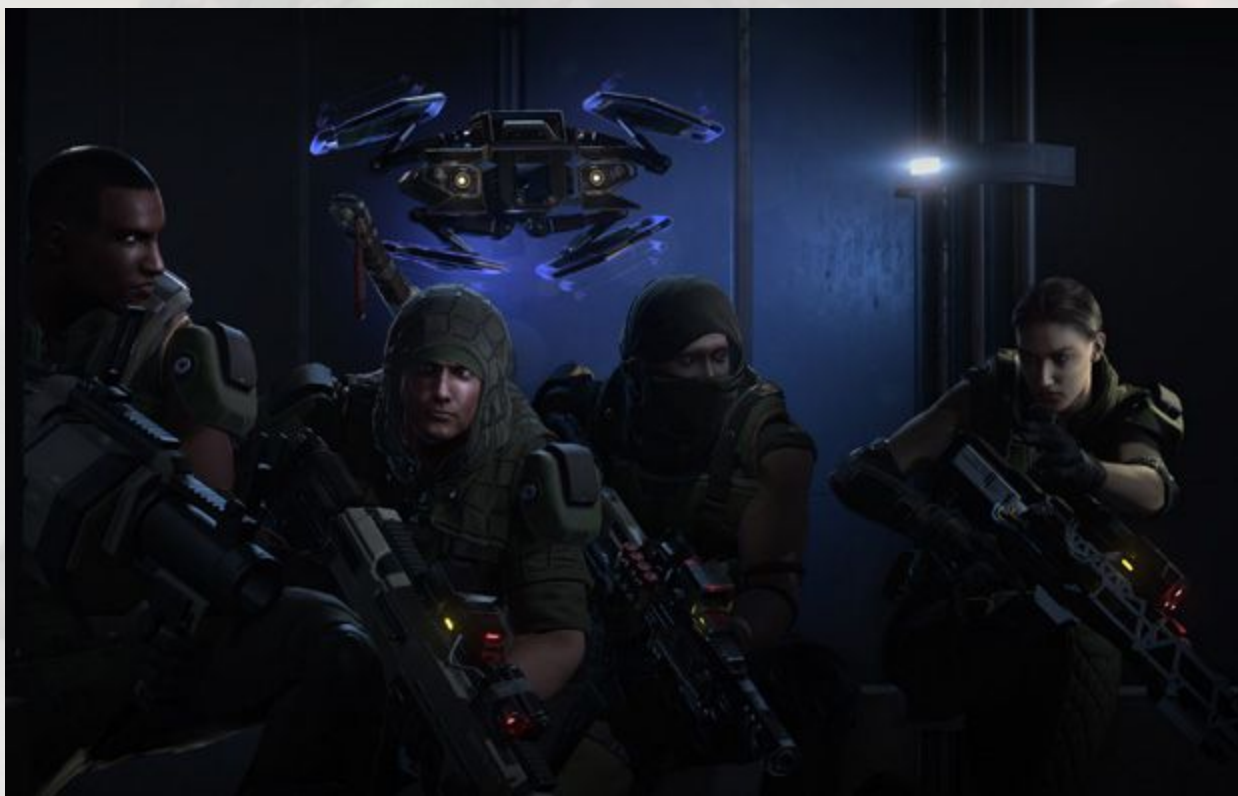
At gamescom this year Firaxis revealed a new gameplay trailer for XCOM 2. The game shares many similarities with Enemy Unknown, but also introduces some interesting new features that look to make it a worthy successor. One of these is the new base of operations that XCOM use called the Avenger.

The Avenger, aptly named as it bears a resemblance to the Helicarrier from the Marvel films, is XCOM's mobile base, used to transport your forces around the world. With the aliens having inhabited Earth for around 20 years, the Avenger is vital to repelling their forces. You use it to coordinate strikes

and missions however your moves aren't unlimited. You have to manage your resources and fuel economy, planning where you'll go and where will be most beneficial.

Travelling the world and completing missions with the

Avenger will gain you rumours from which you can gain intel. This intel will net you resources, supplies or members but since you're limited on how far you can travel, you have to consider if the journey and fuel will be worth it.





The Avenger is run through the same ant-farm view as the last base from Enemy Unknown. This time though you can't access certain areas until you excavate them from alien debris. The Avenger is a repurposed alien vessel and as you progress through the game, you'll be able to access new areas of the ship, discovering secrets about alien technology which could prove extremely useful. The familiar layout feels different though because of a more detailed look at the rooms on offer. The barracks showed fighters training whereas the research centre had scientists working. You can assign staff members to numerous rooms who will provide bonuses to that department. The demo also showed a number

of conversations between characters that highlighted an improved narrative, and a deeper emphasis on story.

With the aliens having occupied Earth for the last 20 years, human resistance is scattered. There's no longer a Global Council so to start off with you'll have a skeleton squad to get you through earlier missions. As you progress though you can recruit resistance members, building your army with a ragtag band of fighters. These soldiers can be customised, with a vast array of editing options being available, including being able to customise their weapons.

The demo didn't show off any combat but it detailed something called dark events.

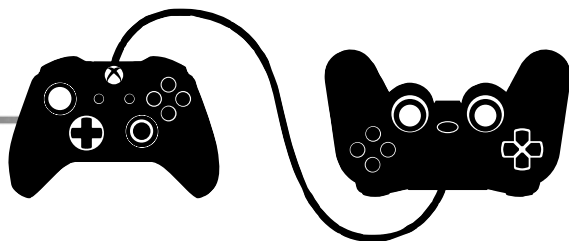
These are events that benefit the aliens, showing them attempting to make special armour or making their enemies stronger. The events change every time you play and you can attempt to stop them, hindering their progress.

Whilst XCOM 2 might not revamp the series in any significant way, the changes that were shown at gamescom were enough to breathe new life into the game. The tactical options afforded from the Avenger look interesting and the setting of an alien occupied Earth coupled with resistance warriors will surely make the game dynamic and tense. Fans should look forward to XCOM 2 when it launches for PC next year on 5th February. ■

XCOM 2 gamescom Interview

Reece got to have a chat with the developer of XCOM 2 to discuss their upcoming title.

By Reece Armstrong



At this year's gamescom Firaxis showed a new gameplay demo for XCOM 2. After seeing this I got a chance to sit down with the developer to discuss the upcoming game.

GameOn:

Hi there, first of all could you tell us about all of the new features that were demonstrated today?

Firaxis:

XCOM 2 takes place about 20 years after the events of XCOM: Enemy Unknown, so we're saying XCOM failed. The aliens took over the world and Earth is an alien occupied planet now, so it's your job to rebuild the resistance. What we wanted to do was make the game a

little more open-ended and a little more proactive, so we did two things on a very high level involving the strategy side and the tactical side. On the tactical side we made procedural maps which we did not have in Enemy Unknown. There are layouts that can have an infinite amount of arrangements, they're no longer static maps, they have beautiful dynamic





lighting which isn't placed in any more and also procedural objectives so the gameplay is different. On the strategy side we've created an open ended world which allows for more choices on the GSV. On Enemy Unknown you'd choose your research, build an item or two maybe build a facility then you'd scan time and wait for your next mission. Now when you go to the GSV in XCOM 2 there are a multitude of decisions to make. You have to expand your resistance and grow it and you also have a mobile base. So you choose where you want to visit, when you want to move it, but there's always a cost to it. For example do you want to

grow the resistance or do you want to go search for rumours? There's a bunch of other things to do, we just wanted it to feel different every time you play.

GameOn:

Enemy Unknown featured a great number of choices regarding countries and support, are you implementing something similar in XCOM 2?

Firaxis:

Yes, so you're talking about the meta-game involving the statuses of the countries. So at the start of XCOM 2 you obviously have no global support, because they are under alien rule and that's

a cool inverse from Enemy Unknown where you have to take back the earth. Aliens aren't invading anymore, you sort of have to invade your own planet to take it back, so you have no support but you can build it on a region by region basis. They change every time you play the game, the layout of the world is different but as you make contact and establish radio relays, which is the mechanism to communicate with the resistance around the world, you'll start seeing other pockets of resistance cells moving around the world. Then you have more choices such as going to Europe, or crossing the ocean, if you have

to enough power, to get to western Africa and those sorts of things become the choices that you have to expand on quickly, and if you don't the aliens have a long term goal which will be presented to you as you go through the story. That's the mechanism which is almost like a doomsday meter which if it gets filled loses you the game. As you open up regions you see where the aliens are making progress and what you have to stop.

GameOn:

How does the mobile base, the Avenger compare to the base from Enemy Unknown?

Firaxis:

We really like the foundation of what we call the ant farm view, the side view and we wanted that foundation there. You can see your base evolve as you clear out elements of the old alien ship which is what it used to be. Now that it's mobile and above ground you can see it move around the world. I

haven't spoken about this to many other people but because it's above ground you can see the environment around the Avenger change. It's not pre-rendered; it can be in a forest or near ice-capped mountains, and it can be in a desert. It has to be mobile so you can spread the resistance which is a big change. Some of the things which are insane instead of excavating below the earth you now pull out the old alien guts of this ship, so you then reformat it to work towards XCOM's advantage





and put in facilities such as Proving Ground or Advanced Warfare Lab, stuff like that. We also have a new staffing system so we have more context and more tangible realness behind your scientists and engineers. In Enemy Unknown there's sort of an abstract number but now you can rescue these men and women from the battlefield and put them to work. They have a name and a face and you know you can assign them to do certain things and you then see them doing the work.

GameOn:

It did look a lot more story based, do you feel there's a big narrative in the game?

Firaxis:

Yeah it's actually one of my favourite parts about XCOM as a strategy game, a lot of strategy games are super open-ended, and they're not known to have story objectives. But that is truly part of XCOM's DNA, to have a strong narrative and a strong story that works with the open-ended systems of the strategy game, it's a unique

proposition that I really like about XCOM. We are going to have a very strong story with high impact cinematics that will push you along and fall in line with what you're doing.

GameOn:

I saw a lot of expanded customisation options, do you think that's going to make you more attached to the characters?

Firaxis:

Definitely that's the underlying psychological driver. For the



development team we're like "why are we putting in all of this extra stuff?" and it's because we want our players to get more attached to their soldiers so you'll be more devastated when they die. Now you can do things such as set their animations to reflect their personality, change their voices. There's a load more visual options, hats, beards, scarves, tattoos which are all in mind with the resistance theme. These guys have been hardened over the past 20 years so we wanted to give you more tools to reflect this.

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GameOn:

Speaking of the resistance, will you have a more limited number of soldiers?

Firaxis:

Yes it's more of a skeleton crew when you start the game but once members of the resistance know about XCOM they'll want to join. There are a limited number of recruits per region though.

GameOn:

Are you including multiplayer?

Firaxis:

Yeah we're doing multiplayer. If you remember Enemy Unknown's multiplayer mode with its 1v1, where you had your dream team and were allocated a budget, we're doing a similar thing with all the new alien units but now they'll be played on procedural maps. So you won't know the exact layout which will make it pretty interesting.

GameOn:

XCOM began as a PC game, is there any particular reason XCOM 2 is exclusive to PC?

Firaxis:

Well Firaxis knows PC best, it's in our pedigree and we believe we can make the best game possible by staying focused on that one platform. We're also going to have some awesome modding tools so it made a lot of sense to put all of our attention on PC to make it happen.

GameOn:

Just to finish what are you most looking forward to from XCOM 2?

Firaxis:

I am most looking forward to getting a sense of the unpredictable nature of the game. I'm getting a sense of that myself and I can't wait to keep doing multiple playthroughs to see how the procedural map system plays out and also see how strategy plays into that. You won't be able to start a new game and say "here's my strategy" because the aliens are now playing with their own strategies and I can't wait to see how that feels. ■



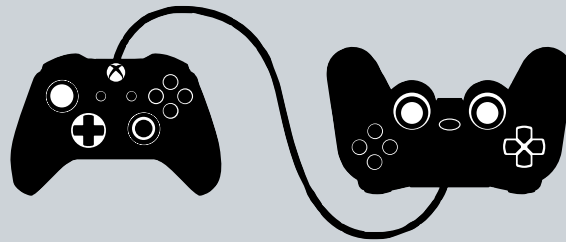
Darksiders 2: Deathinitive Edition Review

Publisher: Nordic Games

Developer: Vigil Games, Gunfire Games

Genre: Action-Adventure

Platform: PC



Release Dates

Out Now (Worldwide)

By Ian Kuan



Death is many things. The last great adventure. The one thing all beings have in common. Inevitable. Terrifying. Mysterious. And now that I've played Darksiders 2: Deathinitive

Edition, I can add "pretty good" to that list. Somehow that seems less poetic.

Darksiders 2 is a third person beat em' up puzzler that, much like the first in the series, didn't

make much of a splash. So, it came as a surprise to me to see a re-release of the second game touting improved graphics and all of the DLC. Once I got over my astonishment as to why anyone would go through the





Darksiders 2: Deathinitive Edition

effort to resurrect a franchise that can only be described as “tepid,” I saddled up with the pale rider and rode.

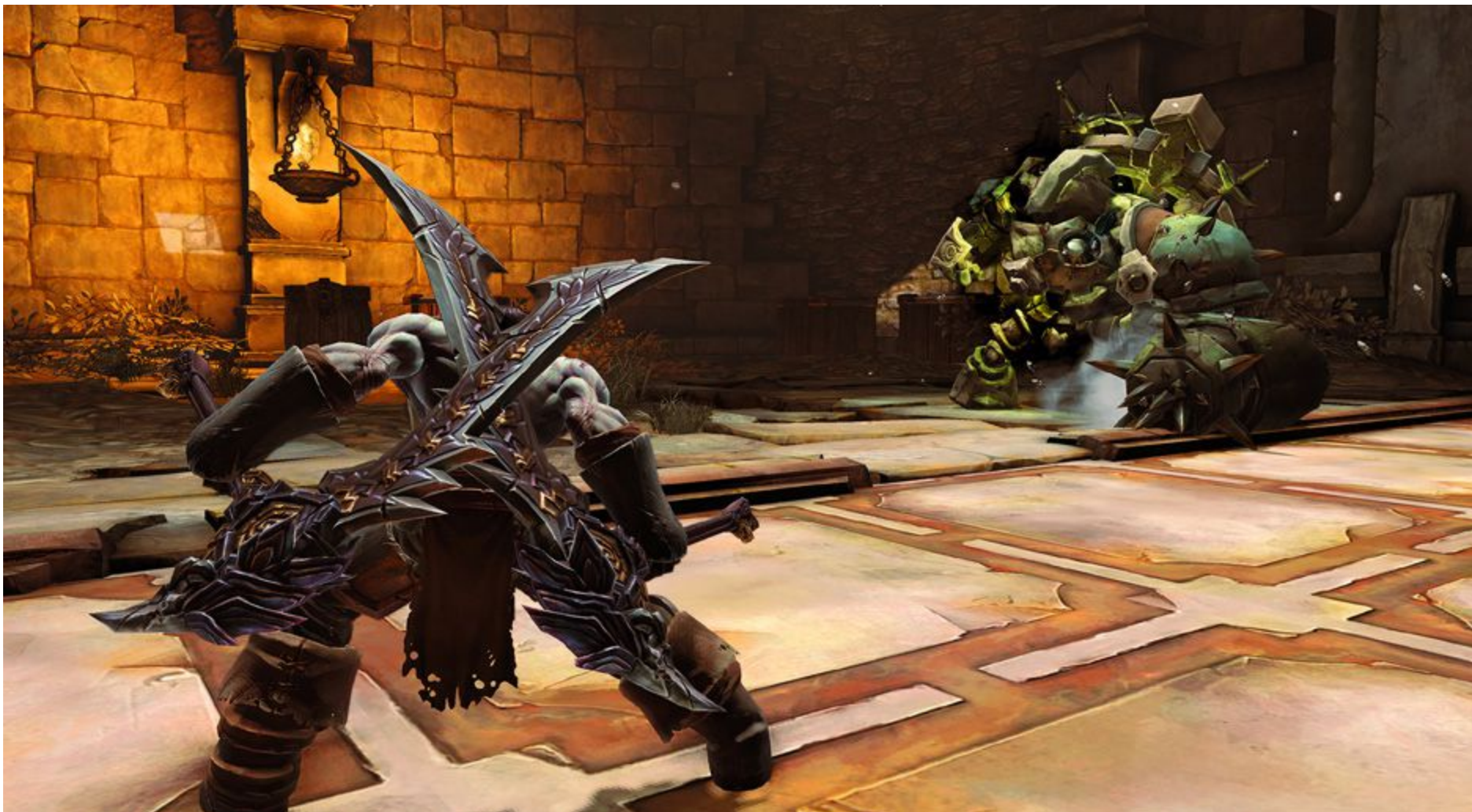
Or, I would have, if the game didn't crash on me. I see you're banking on depth over first impressions, Darksiders 2. My second attempt to launch the game was considerably more successful, though my expectations were tuned to a suitably low level. A cartoonish cinematic laid out the excuse plot: the four horsemen of the apocalypse are actually a quatrain of anti-heroes who enforce balance between

creation and destruction. Also Pestilence and Famine are replaced by the more marketable sounding Fury and Strife. War stands accused of bringing about the apocalypse and Death hopes to redeem him by finding the Tree of Life. Once I was through with the cinematic and the tutorial, I found myself smack dab in the middle of Generic Fantasy World. Massive shoulder pauldrons, European accents, and ancient conflicts between good and evil passed through one ear and out the other. All of this made sillier by the fact that Death looks

like an anemic bodybuilder at a heavy metal concert.

Once I got past the generic aesthetics, I managed to dig up a small gem. Platforming and puzzling is all the modern standard with wall running and ledge climbing, but the combat of Darksiders 2 is actually quite stimulating. While it does occasionally smack of a watered down God of War title, the simple two button combo system and straightforward abilities make for an engaging experience that rewards good reflexes and careful attention. There's even a Diablo-esque loot





system, where new weapons and armor drop from fallen foes and have a host of incrementally increasing stats and effects. Like a bag of theatre popcorn, I know it's got very little substance to it, but that doesn't make it any less enjoyable. Even Death's dialogue carries a quality that tickles my sweet tooth for meaningless fun. His quips and the exasperated tone he takes when presented with mundane side quests made me chuckle consistently. It is almost as though he is riffing the very game he is shackled to, though he unfortunately never touches the subject of bugs and shoddy optimization.

While I have not experienced another crash to desktop when playing Darksiders 2 (the developers released a hotfix), the game is not well wrought. Merely turning the camera too fast causes stuttering and jumping, going into aiming mode ratchets up the mouse sensitivity to near unusable levels, and shadows look off. Furthermore, the lock on system used in combat is disorienting when trying to select one

opponent from many and wall running can be inconsistent. Still, despite its foibles and flaws, Darksiders 2 is just quirky enough to earn a tentative thumbs up from this reviewer. If you're looking for high concepts or top-notch engineering, look elsewhere, but if you're willing to endure a bit of saddle rash, go ahead and mount up with the pale horseman. ■



D2: Deathinitive Edition



6/10

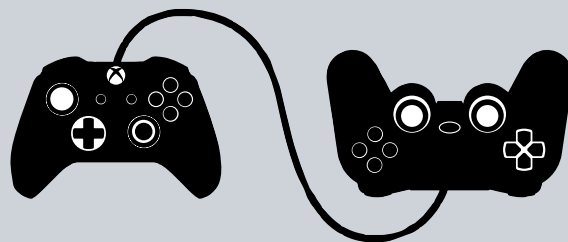
Armello Review

Publisher: League of Geeks

Developer: League of Geeks

Genre: RPG

Platform: PC



Release Dates

Out Now (Worldwide)

By Cat Swinburn



I love boardgames. They always give me that nostalgic feeling of crowding around a coffee table in pyjamas, and rolling dice with family and friends. I would be lying if I said I have never played a board game on my own, rolling the dice for imaginary opponents. But it just isn't the same.

Until now.

Armello is a strange and wonderful amalgamation of virtual card game, board game and turn-based strategy from Aussie indie developers, League of Geeks. Such a mixture of concepts is certainly overwhelming at first, but an extensive tutorial - or Prologue

- leaves you confident that you can successfully navigate the card, dice, combat and political system of the game. With a fairytale landscape and lovely, cartoon-style characters, it quickly sucks you into a world of war and magic.

In the land of Armello, the king - a lion, naturally - is overcome by a disease called rot, which has corrupted his body and mind. Each dawn of the game's day and night cycle, he gradually succumbs to the disease and loses a health point. The aim of the game is to race three other players - either friends, or AI - to either kill the king and take control of Armello, or have the highest number of Prestige points when he dies. There are a number of ways to take down the king, so that most play-styles are accommodated. Whether you prefer brute force, a sly





assassination, or even to lurk in the sidelines slowly growing in political power - there is a place for you in Armello.

Before I plunge further into this land of thrones and assassination, I'd like to take a moment to point out how beautiful the game is. Its character lineup is almost Disney-like in style, and the landscape forms a soft, fantastical backdrop. Zooming in pulls the scene into a pop-up book view, whereas zooming out causes a haze of white clouds to gradually obscure your view. The music is dramatic, but unobtrusive - although you are aware of it, and it reflects the actions occurring in the game by becoming more urgent in combat, for example, it remains at the edge of your hearing, and doesn't interrupt your

calculating thought processes. The animations during the game are captivating and perfectly compliment the cartoon-like art style. Even the cards are animated slightly, with the barest detail of movement to bring them to life. Hovering over a card reveals a signature of the animator and artist, which is a touching reminder that the entire game is, essentially, a piece of artwork.

It is a shame, therefore, that the world is so tiny. There are very few hexes to traverse, and I could see all of the tiles in a handful of turns. So, although the map varies from match to match, there just isn't enough of Armello to keep you wanting to come back for more. This does force you into combat much more, as you cannot avoid one another for long (unless you are

stealthed in a forest at night, or are using a stealth spell).

The varying characters, on the other hand, do encourage multiple replays, if only to get a feel of the perks of each one. The characters hark from feuding clans; Rat Clan, Rabbit Clan, Wolf Clan and Bear Clan. Some characters are engineered towards stealth and assassination, whereas others are stronger, or more magical, or have an affinity for gold. Varying character, and changing your approach to becoming the successive ruler of Armello, changes the game entirely. It is most certainly easier to hoard prestige, and win the throne by means of political power, but assassination is an entertaining challenge, and a risk. Assassination attempts are dangerous, and failure

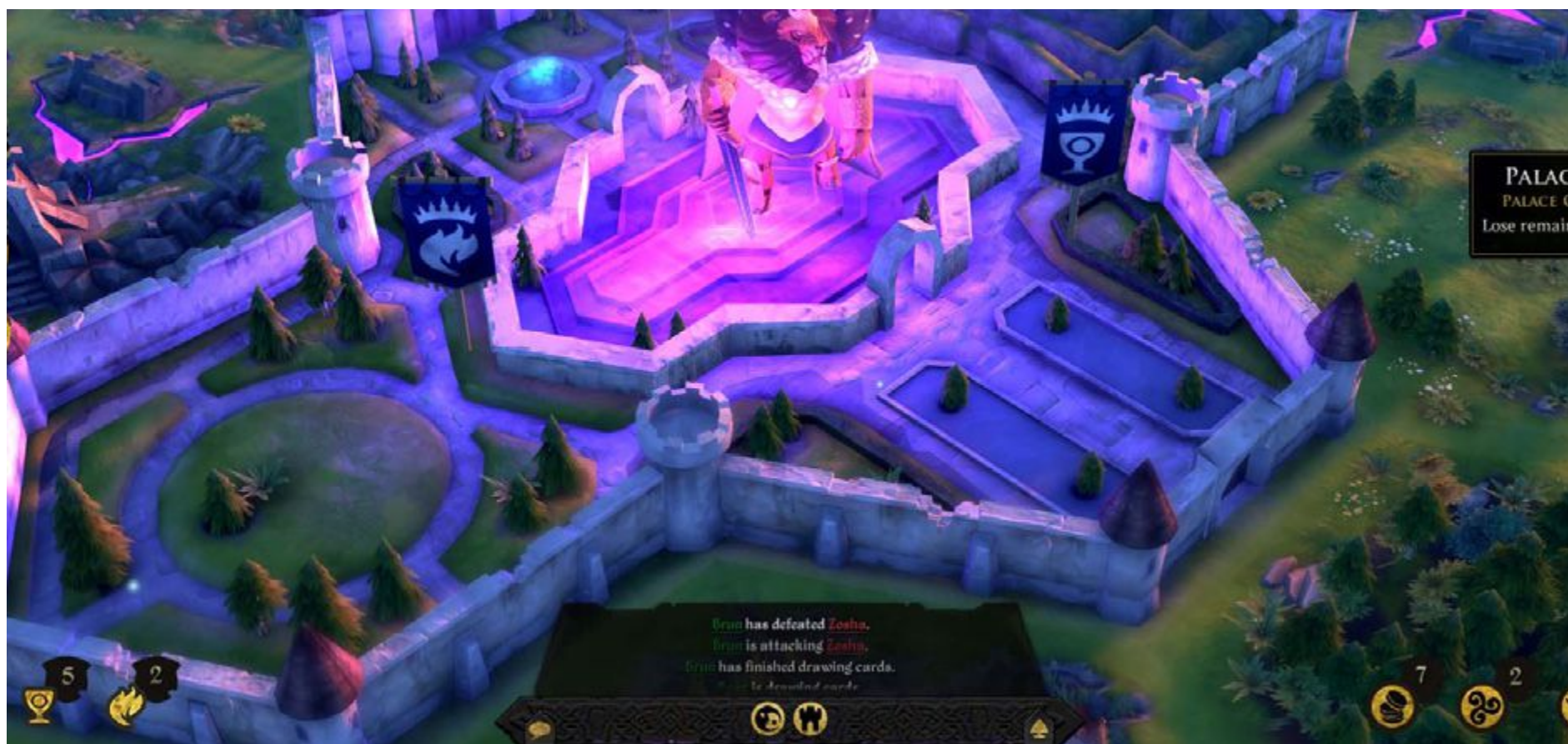
can give your opponents an advantage. Questing awards each character either recruits for the party, combat perks, gold or prestige, and quests vary between characters. Some quests offer a scenario, and you are given two options. One option is considered a 'dangerous' choice, and you are given a percentage chance of success. The cost of losing is usually paid in life points, but winning can award a valuable card as well as additional strength, magic etc. A safe choice is also offered, which omits the chance of winning loot. I found myself biting my nails more than once as I clicked the dangerous option, and punched the air in celebration or hissed in disappointment.

Your decisions heavily influence your chances of success in the game, and you find out quickly how the delicate balance of chance and risk-taking can tip the dynamics of the game out of your favour in an instant.

Armello offers yet more choices, so when you are the Prestige Leader - ie, the character currently possessing the most prestige - the king offers you a choice of two royal decrees. These can affect either players or situations in the board. Decrees affecting players will also affect the Prestige Leader, so you find yourself in nail-biting moments where you must decide whether to make certain sacrifices, and what option would benefit you the most.

Some characters are more efficient in battle during the day or the night, so even the choice of engaging in combat becomes a vital, game-changing decision.

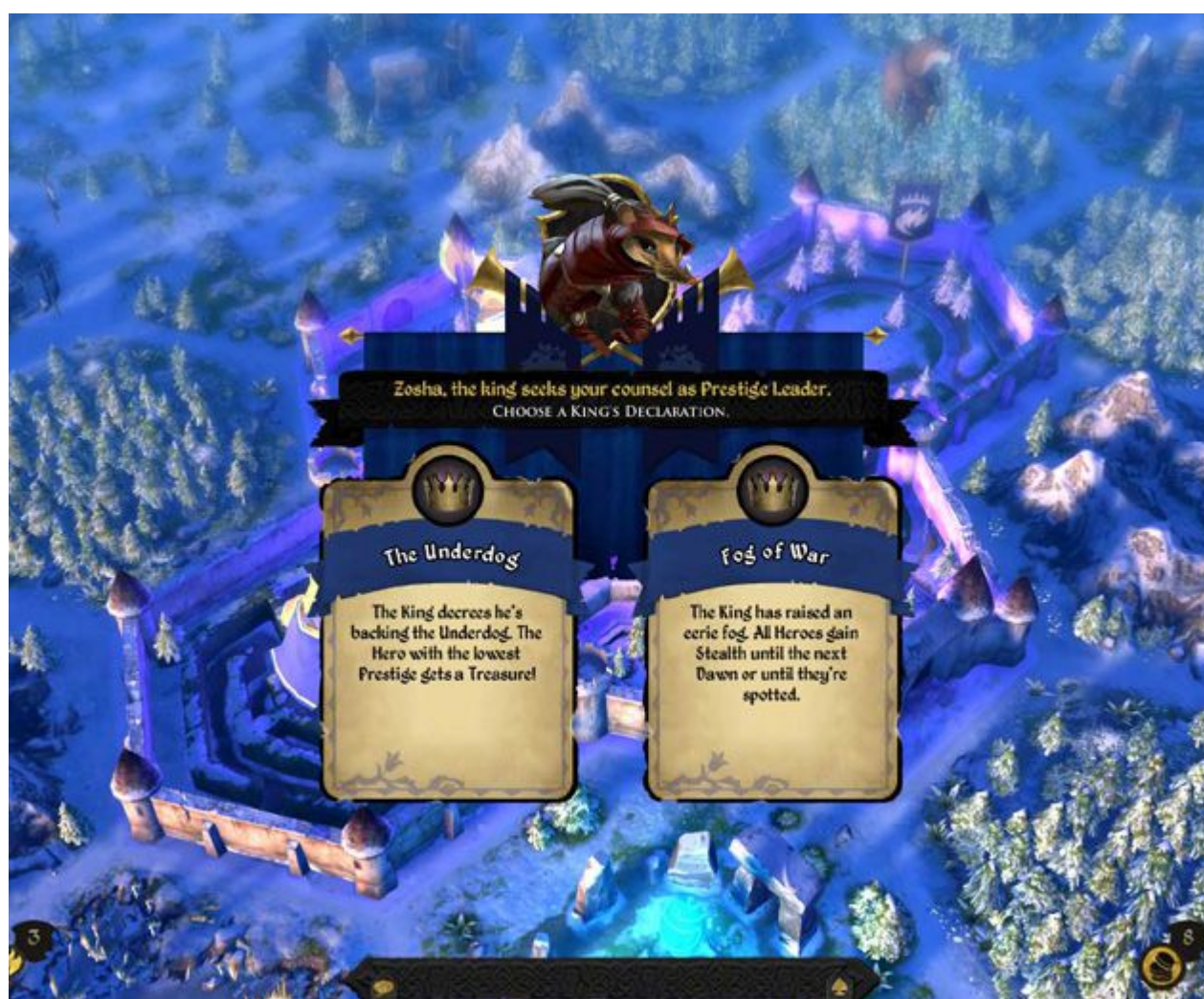
Cards include a myriad of spells, trickeries and equipable items which can be played at any point in the game - even when it is not your turn. This has the potential to completely unhinge the flow of the game, and curveballs can be thrown in at any point to mix things up. However, especially when playing against AI, the game can move very quickly. As a new player who is not familiar with the cards' effects by sight, you often don't have time to read and select a card before the opportunity to use it has passed.



There is no pause, so you must be extremely quick to draw the right card and the right time.

There are few different types of tiles - they include settlement tiles and dungeon tiles, both used to generate gold. Killing other heroes is a sure way to earn gold and prestige, so setting perils and engaging in combat is encouraged. Certain cards apply rot, and the only way to regenerate health is to kill other heroes. You are therefore forced to take a twisted, murderous path, slashing your way to being the darkest ruler Armello has ever known. You can, of course, take the throne by brute force, or by curing the king with special stones. If nobody achieves these, then the most prestigious hero at the time of the king's death wins.

With so much to consider, you would expect Armello to be fast-paced. It is, after all, a race to victory. However, each AI character takes a turn and you are forced to sit through and watch as they draw cards, change position, battle, deal with perils, and cope with every hardship and choice that you face on your own turn. It takes

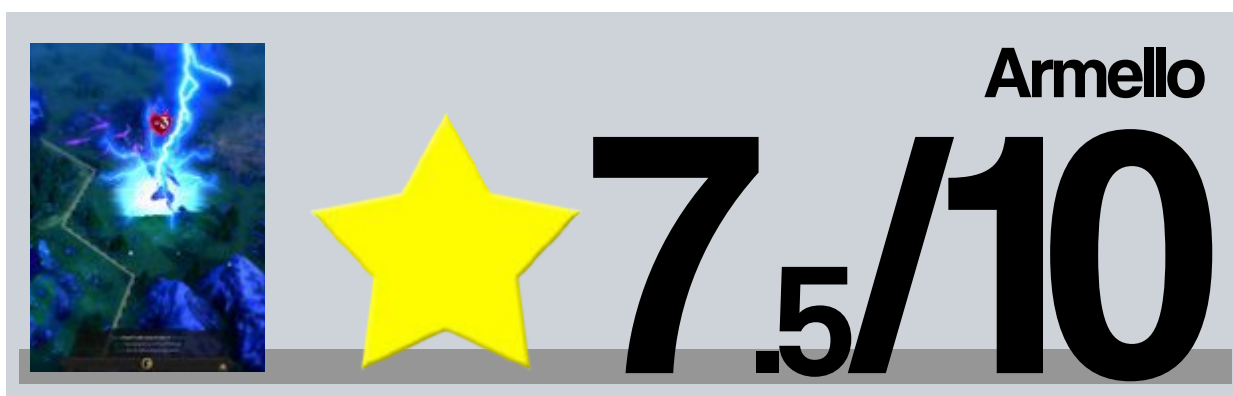


a very long time for it to finally roll back around to your turn, and there is no way to skip or fast-track through these moments. It becomes rather tedious after just a couple of turns, and I found myself taking time to text or play on other games between goes.

With so much information to take in, the learning curve is understandably steep, and so it is thankful that the price of

death is simply to be returned to your respective clan settlement. There is a multiplayer option, but it plays very much the same as single player.

In all, Armello is an intriguing and absorbing concept, which is for the most part well executed. The graphics and animations are beautiful, and almost nostalgic, whereas the gameplay is urgent and demanding. ■



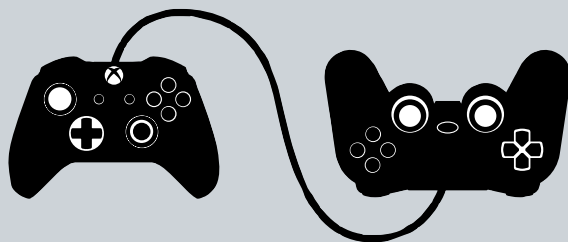
The Park Review

Publisher: Funcom

Developer: Funcom

Genre: Adventure

Platform: PC



Release Dates

Out Now (Worldwide)

By VodKaVK



In *The Park*, there's a creepy-looking and murderous squirrel-mascot, and a gloomy and eerie amusement park, where kids go and run around kicking and screaming during the day, but that drastically changes at night. The mix of an environment designed for something innocent and pure like children with a macabre series of events has a very effective result. It is indeed a very promising feature for horror games, but it's executed radically different to games like *Five Nights at Freddy's*. *The Park* is not a game that uses jump-scares and tension as a goal, but rather as tools to build up the nitty-gritty of the game: a narrative-driven experience. Similar to what I mentioned in my review of *SOMA*, horror is a means to lead the audience into a particular train of thought.

What drives the narrative is not the superficial motivation of the main character, Lorraine, but what she discovers because of it. As the park closes, she realises that her son, Callum, left his teddy bear behind. That pushes her kid to imprudently run through the bars of the park's main gate and defyingly

go in to recover it. So Lorraine, understandably a bit pissed off at him, chases him like the good mother she is. And that's when things start to get weird. The park is a wrecked and deserted mess. She points out that this wasn't the state of the park when she was leaving, but brushes over





that fact and ventures after her kid. After all, the safety of her kid is above everything.

From the beginning of the game, *The Park* presents itself as a slow-paced first person 'walking simulator', where the little interaction there is consists of picking up and reading notes. We can call out for our son, who will ask us to find him. Following his voice, we'll have a thorough tour throughout the park, getting on every ride in order to progress. But other than that, there's not much to do, to the point that

the first ride is nothing other than a boat ride. Even when we spot the aforementioned squirrel glancing at us with those penetrating and soulless eyes, slowly and rhythmically inhaling and exhaling a couple of paces away from us, we can't do anything. Lorraine doesn't react to its presence and since at that point we're buckled up on a ride, there's nothing we can do to acknowledge it, other than eye back at it. But aside from the occasional awkwardness of seeing something odd happening in front of you and Lorraine not

reacting to it, the game benefits a lot from its mechanics.

On the one hand, it is true that sometimes the game feels like a ride (how appropriate), and that we're there to spectate what unfolds before us. The way the game foreshadows every event and funnels you into each one of them is not too subtle either. On the other hand, this slow pace – even for such a short game – makes Lorraine's chase infuriating, but not always in a bad way. We begin genuinely troubled for Callum's safety, but we start feeling as if he was





taking the mick out of us, in a very creepy way. It whispers “Come find me, mummy”, but we know that he’s very far away from us. Lorraine’s soliloquy gradually changes, covering a range of emotions towards her son. The more scared – and impatient – the player becomes, the more resentful Lorraine’s self-reassuring monologues are. From the angst and worry expressed at the beginning, she’s gradually thrown into a vicious cycle of remorse and spite towards her family, friends

and own son; and as the player, we feel this frustration through the lethargic mechanics.

Perhaps the reason why playing this game feels so demotivating at times is due to its unrealistic and purposelessly dull level design. Every attraction is miles away from each other, and there are so few in the park. They become episodes within the game, and travelling from one to the next is a space for Lorraine’s to give us an over-explanatory view of some

aspect of her life. Even when done this way, I had to wait up until she was done talking, refraining myself from picking up a note, so Lorraine didn’t start talking about the note over her own monologue. That being said, the continental vistas that the mountainous North American location provides feel truly cathartic, particularly when on top of the Ferris-wheel or as we walk among the pine trees.

The parallelism between the player and Lorraine strengthens

the connection between the two, despite never being fully achieved. We never feel as attached to the son, for example, as we don't really interact with him. But the game cleverly uses the son's lack of presence to focus on Lorraine's own self-centred experience, without stressing too much on how their relationship is, but rather how Lorraine feels about it. The exclusion and alienation of the boy is utilised to shape the player's emotions without direct influence by the boy. In other words, our empathic connection with Lorraine makes us feel like how Lorraine feels towards her son. Lorraine is a well-built character, and her inner discourse will allow us to get a glimpse of what it is like being a single mother in such a precarious situation, and the hardships that she has had to endure. However, towards the end, we start losing control of her and our input is not important anymore. When we start doing meaningful things, the game decides that is not our time to play anymore.

The crux of the game is not what we can see in the game. It is not what Lorraine repeats to herself, or not even the

very ending. This game relies a lot on what it doesn't say. There are plenty of details that hint at very radically distinctive approaches to the game, and what's important in this game are all those lingering thoughts that the player will have. The game's ending is meant to leave you confused and dazzled, doubting yourself and wondering about what you just witnessed. But it doesn't do that in the same way as, let's say, BioShock Infinite did, throwing very complex concepts at you and giving you a lazy explanation of what happened with more holes than a strainer.

The way The Park gets you is by giving you just enough

information about the blanks in the story, and letting your mind subconsciously select which details are relevant, depending on what you find and pay attention to, and completing the story with them. This game doesn't encourage exploration, but although notes are never hidden, it's easy to miss some, or neglect a line of a letter because at the time it didn't make much sense. This game will create a disparate experience for each player as the nature of the characters and notes can lead to very different interpretations. This, nevertheless, will at times render some characters or details superfluous in the story and without explanation of why





or how they were there. That is, if you have no knowledge prior to playing the game.

The main issue that *The Park* has is that it is a very self-referential game. Funcom, the developers, have expanded upon concepts that are very alien to many people, as most characters and symbols are taken straight out of *The Secret World* (TSW), an MMORPG released by the same studio in 2012. This game dealt with themes relating to occult phenomena, the underworld, and above all the psyche. Although *The Park* works as a standalone piece, it's filled with lore when situated in context with TSW. My experience lacked any background in TSW, so despite being a bit confused, I was able to conjure up some juicy explanation.

After completing it, I did some digging about TSW's universe and figured out much of the symbolism within *The Park*, which shut any theories I may have had about the events that took place in the game. Contradictorily, knowing more about this game makes it lose a great deal of its potential, but it sorts out some of the incoherencies it may have.

The Park is, above all, a psychological experience that allows for interpretation by the player that is not acquainted with TSW. Nevertheless, this glowing feature is thwarted by

the fact that many references make no sense outside a very niche context. The way the occult is dealt with in TSW has a much lighter tone than in *The Park*, and even when put together, some elements don't exactly congeal well. My advice is this: play this game with no prior knowledge, and after that, do some research upon its lore. This game may not be the most coherent of all in terms of story, but the technical quality and emotions that is sure to stir up in you is enough to give it a go. ■



The Park
7.5/10

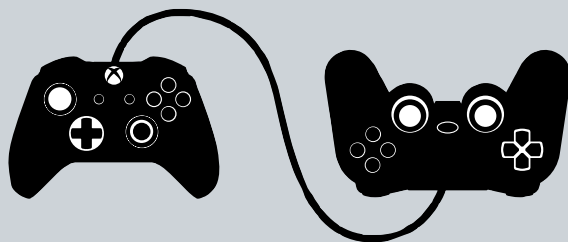
Bloodborne: The Old Hunters Review

Publisher: SCE Japan Studio

Developer: FromSoftware

Genre: RPG

Platform: PS4



Release Dates

Out Now (Worldwide)

By Ben Robson



I have returned from the nightmare once again, a little scarred and a little confused, but I found a new hat that says it was all worth it in the end. The first thing I noticed about The Old Hunters DLC was the striking degree of similarity it had to Artorias of the Abyss from the humble days of Dark Souls. FromSoftware reuses old environments and

ideas quite spectacularly, subverting and drawing upon the player's expectations in order to generate a masterful (if infuriating) experience.

As with Artorias of the Abyss, The Old Hunters takes place in a realm that is slightly out of sync with the main game, being set in a nightmarish version of Central Yharnam. Players are

introduced to new characters, and shown the effect that the beast plague has had on older ones that the player has either met previously or read about in hidden story notes. Names such as Ludwig and Laurence will resonate with my fellow lore seekers, and allow veteran hunters to flesh out the backstory of a world that refuses to outright tell the





Bloodborne: The Old Hunters

player what they are facing. This can lead to some interesting narrative implications, as well as pivotal moments of awe-inspiring, impactful boss encounters with some of these more significant characters. As always, FromSoftware delivers a fantastic soundtrack that's paired with such battles, all of which intensify as the boss takes on new, more threatening forms, and providing a dynamic score of mostly original music.

As the player progresses through The Old Hunters, they will see the environments gradually go from being familiar to ridiculously unique. I would usually scoff at the use of recycled enemies and locales, but the Hunter's Nightmare manages to feel like a level in its own right; the player can no longer rely on their knowledge of the area, and must navigate through the city as though it were completely new. The DLC takes enemies from different

stages of the base game and litters them throughout the initial areas, contributing to this feeling of the uncanny, a well known element of horror. Finding the flea-woman things in the Yharnam aqueduct came as a real shock (especially considering what a pain they are to kill).

As with the base game, the number of equippable weapons and items are few and far between, and although I





appreciate the variety when it comes to movesets, there were only a few unique ideas that impressed me. Many of the enemies fought with predictable attack patterns and proved simple to parry, meaning that, although skill is rewarded, the player is never encouraged to try out new techniques. Saying that, the fights with the larger, more grotesque boss monsters were particularly intense and exhilarating. The player is forced to rely more on calculated dodges and weapon strikes than guns and Molotov cocktails. I came away from these fights feeling absolutely invincible (that it, before the next area showed me otherwise).

The Old Hunters makes its inspiration well known, and it was nice to see some more overt references to H.P.

Lovecraft's work than were featured in the main game. The themes of forbidden knowledge and the impotence of man came through exceedingly well, and the final area of the DLC felt as though it was ripped straight from the author's imagination; I genuinely expected the final boss to be Cthulhu himself. These later areas did a great job of creating atmosphere, and fighting my way through them was unlike anything I had felt in Bloodborne before, while my emotional response towards many of the non-player characters and enemies was always that

conglomeration of disgust, pity and guilt that's indicative of director Hidetaka Miyazaki.

Considering its length, The Old Hunters really shines as one of Bloodborne's most impressive features. Each level is intimidating and artistically designed, the lore behind each character is suitably grim, and the music will quickly find itself leaving its gothic stain on my iPod. Overall, I'm impressed by and grateful for the additional content, and I can say without a doubt that I'll be playing through it again and again, grinning absurdly all the while. ■



Bloodborne: The Old Hunters



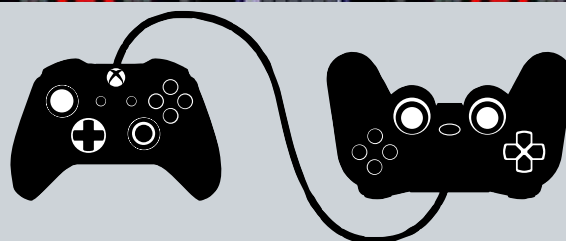
9/10

Vertigo Void Review

Publisher: Merge Games
Developer: James de Silva
Genre: Puzzle
Platform: PC

Release Dates
Out Now (Worldwide)

By VodKaVK

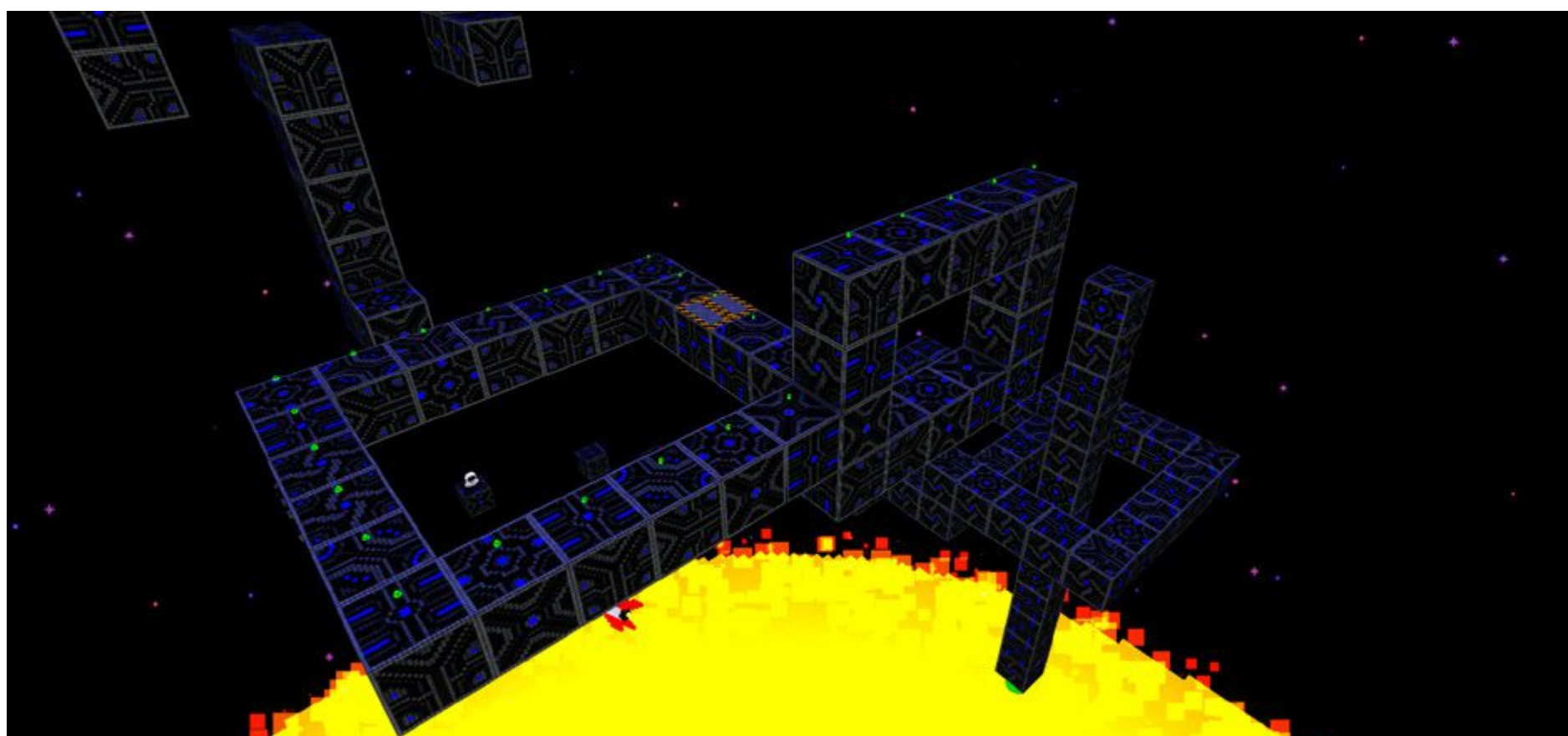


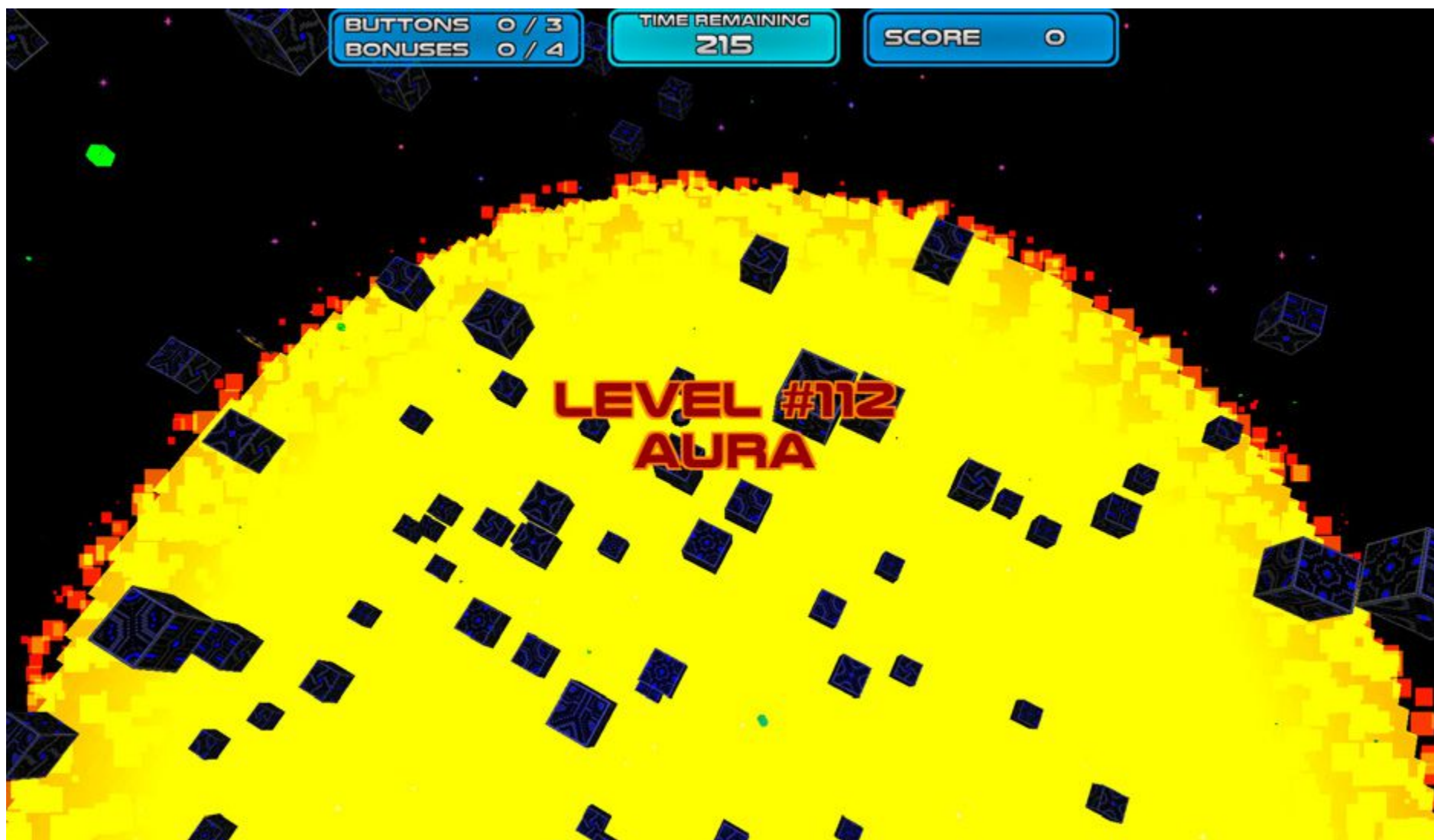
There is a big division in the making of videogames that was only recently bridged. When game critics type fancy terms like ‘ludonarrative dissonance’, they refer to the two main levels through which games can evoke a desired emotion: mechanics and narrative. Vertigo Void seems to fall into the category of those mechanics-focused

indie games, like Super Meat Boy or Fez. These puzzle-based experiences are usually pretty silly in terms of story, but bring novel and engaging mechanics that the player can spend hours and hours sunk into. It’s a shame that wider discussion on game sites is limited to story-based titles. Similarly, Vertigo Void offers some mind-racking puzzles and, like other

mechanics-based games, it neglects depth of writing for complexity of gameplay.

Derived out of the initial idea of manipulating a 3D environment, in Vertigo Void the player has the ability to play with gravity. The player is perched on the outside hull of a hovering space station, where, as an astronaut, they must activate all buttons





scattered throughout the outside of the station, and make their way into the hatch once it's open. The rub is that it is possible to virtually walk along any surface, no matter which direction it's facing; if the station were a cube – and it might as well be seen as it's literally made out of 'minecraftian' cubes –, one could step over all sides without fear of falling off. However, in order to 'change' the direction of the gravity pull, the player needs to look out for a cube with no adjacent cubes at either side. But this idea, as complex as it may seem, is pretty easy to grasp once you dive in. The game ultimately

becomes an exercise of path-finding to get to the next button or platform, and here's where the meat of the game really lies. Once you spin the platform around a few times, it becomes increasingly demanding to orientate yourself.

The problem with Vertigo Void is that it's only a meager expansion of the mechanics that we've seen in 1998's Kula World. This game, released for Playstation, had the same premise, but the beach ball protagonist was much more charismatic. Not only was Kula World more appealing and new-fangled at the time,

but it resonated with the technological leap that the new console generation had brought a few years earlier. It wasn't the accessibility to this technology, but rather the reach that the PS1 had in the market that incentivised experimenting in 3D digital environments. Games like these were now widespread and accessible to everybody, and there wasn't the need to have a high-end PC to play them. With this mentality, Kula World was conceived as a way to explore 3D environments in a way that wouldn't be possible in real life. At that point, names like Escher or Piranesi were clear inspirations, and Kula

Vertigo Void

World turned these ideas into a light-hearted playground.

Vertigo Void begs the question of what has been improved upon. A quick look at the mechanics shows that, although it has much more variety than its pioneer, it sometimes feels out of place. The player has the chance to experiment with more devices that challenge them in unique ways, like inverting gravity or teleporting the astronaut. The latter in particular can often become an annoyance, as you will be very disorientated after appearing in a different part of the level, not knowing which direction

you're facing. Bonus pick-ups let you boost your score, or speed up or slow down the timer.

Even the score system, which gives you a false sense of skill, doesn't contribute to how the game plays out in comparison to Kula World. Vertigo Void is, for all intents and purposes, Kula Word with more levels, little improvement in gameplay, and different art style.

Undoubtedly, the most noticeable change is in the visuals. Note that I'm using the word change and not improvement. Vertigo Void uses a pixel art style that contrasts a dark blue station with a

bright yellow and orange sun in the background. I presume this is meant to outline the station's edges and lets the player find their way more easily; but the sun is too bright, and the black and blue space in the background matches the station's colours, which can make them blend with one another. The pixelated models reinforce the idea of cubes, although at times it may result a bit jarring, since pixelated styles often denote 2D games. However, since it is a 'simulated' pixel art for the astronaut and station's models, it holds up just enough to not confuse the player and wear





them out. The astronaut's not nearly as fun to control as the bouncy beach ball, and Kula World, with its occasional trippy levels and tour around the world, had in general much more personality than Vertigo Void, and only rarely had any camera or visual incompetence.

Vertigo Void is admittedly more challenging and its levels are more tortuous than Kula World's, but it is still a rehashed Kula World nonetheless. I can't shake the feeling that the original game was cleaner and more capable of conveying the

level's structure. Vertigo Void, mainly due to the visual design, feels much more cluttered, confusing and unwelcoming. It may seem that I'm classifying Vertigo Void as downright terrible, but the truth is that it's a game that can offer a good few hours of fun. As I've reiterated in this review, the game pales in comparison

with Kula World, a game that I happened to love when I was younger. If you dare to dive into Vertigo Void, do it with the thought in the back of your mind that out there, there is a game with lower res and much more to offer. And no, it's not just nostalgia. ■



Vertigo Void
6/10

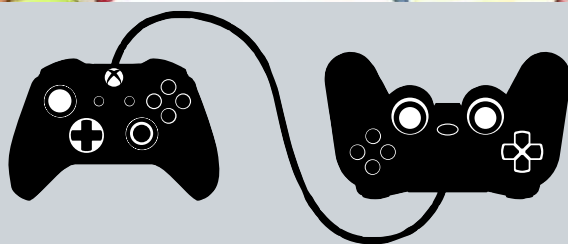
Balls of Glory Pinball Review

Publisher: Microsoft Studios

Developer: Zen Studios

Genre: Sport

Platform: PC, PS4, Xbox One, PS3, Xbox 360, PS Vita



Release Dates

Out Now (Worldwide)

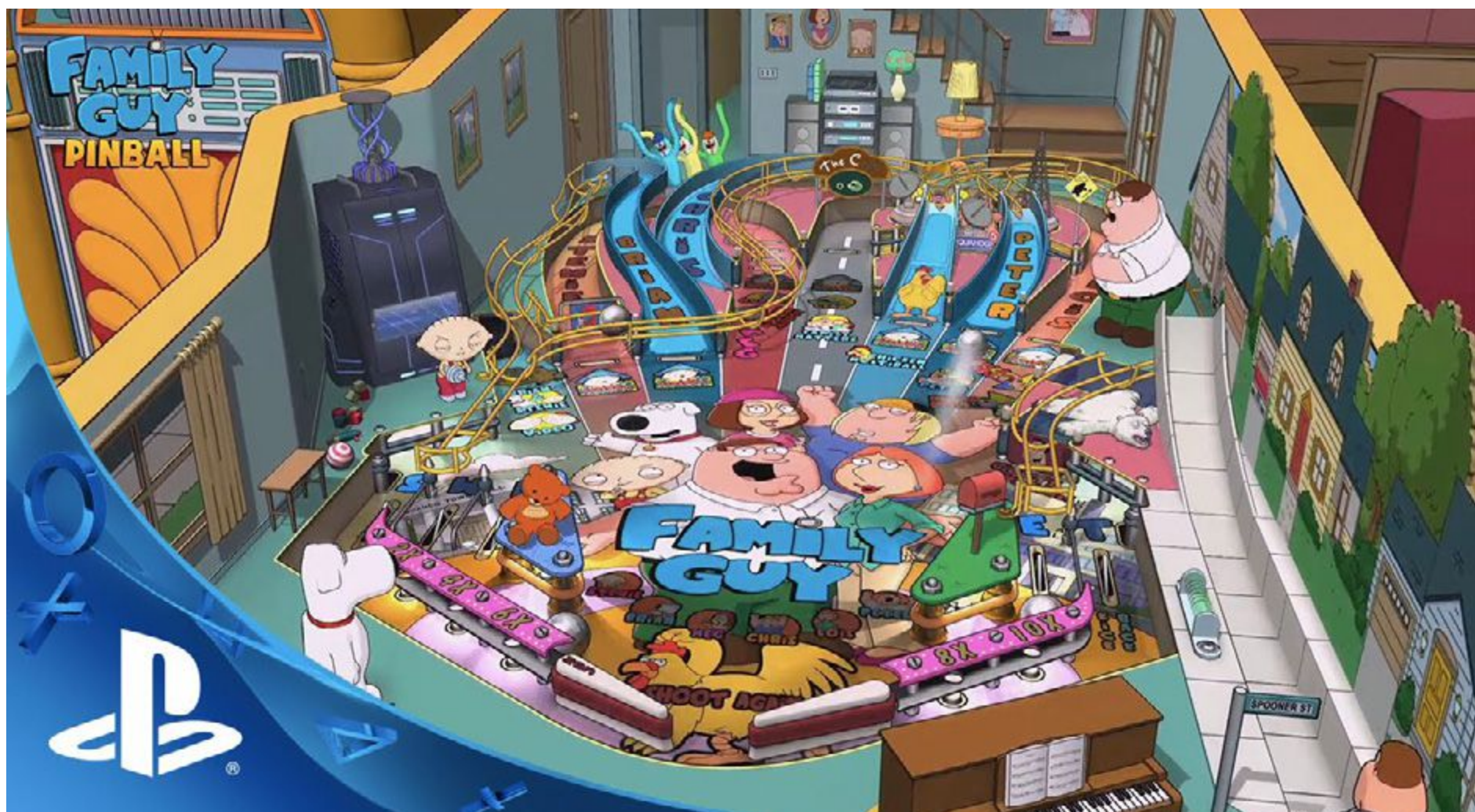
By Gary Sheppard



In case you hadn't noticed from my excitement over things like Pang and Dizzy, or the ridiculous number of owned consoles on my profile here on GameOn, I'm something of a retro gamer. Don't get me wrong, I love my current-gen (I'm reviewing this via the PS4) but there's something

about a shiny old arcade game that I particularly love. Sadly, arcades are all but gone in the UK nowadays and as the game cabinets are replaced with penny push machines and one-armed bandits, so too are the pinball machines that used to nestle between them.

Whilst the machines themselves are a rarer and rarer sight nowadays, pinball at home has never been healthier, with Pinball FX 2 being the best-selling game on XBLA back in 2011. With the increased interest in home pinball comes more competition, so in order to keep up, it's up to





Zen to keep releasing things that keep their players happy. Step forward Balls of Glory, an addon featuring some of the most popular adult cartoons of the moment.

You get four tables for your £7.99 and each is themed after a different TV show. You've got four of the Fox network's finest here, namely Bob's Burgers, Archer, Family Guy and American Dad. Each table is unique with a theme, based around the show it's portraying with the characters taking centre stage.

Graphically, they did a Sterling job with all the flashing lights

and colour that you want from pinball. It's a game you would want to play on a large sized screen. There's a lot going on with some of the tables which could make it difficult to see what's going on. I found that playing on the TV itself was fine as long as I was sat in the right place on the sofa, but when I played via remote play on my tablet or Vita, it was just too cramped to really tell exactly what you were doing. The actual Vita version scrolls and does away with that issue, however Cross Buy works from Vita to PS4 and not the other way round. If you plan on playing on both systems then you'll want to buy it on the

Vita then import it to your PS4. This was a little irritating to me as if I'd known I would have got it the other way around.

The tables aren't just flat, but they're rich with bonuses and extra features. I've put a good 10 hours into the game so far but still haven't seen everything it has to offer. The game makes use of the fact that it's not restricted by what can be crafted mechanically. It has a number of features that probably could be created on a real pinball table, but it would be a particularly extravagant one that would likely be too expensive to actually make. For example, one of the bonuses

Balls of Glory Pinball

on the Archer table sees the backdrop flip around to reveal a moving train on which Archer pops up alongside a terrorist; mimicking the famous scene in the show where he realises that fighting on the top of a moving train isn't as cool as the movies make it look. In the Family Guy table there's a mini shmup as one of the bonuses where you control Stewie on a mission to blast Bertram and his flying army out of the skies.

The American Dad table sees Francine and Stan take to the middle of the table itself for an

The game features a number of voice samples from the shows themselves. For the adult-rated shows, only family friendly phrases are picked. The game is aimed at all ages so there's no rude words in here. This doesn't really detract from the game as there's plenty of non-rude quotes to pick from.

Some of the references may be a little obscure if you're not a long time fan of the show in question, but they all make for good fun even if you haven't seen the episode from which the idea is taken. However, some of them play a little too much. For example, there's a number of phrases you'll hear on the Archer table for losing a ball, but there's only one for a saved ball (Lana shouts "Do not use the nerve gas!") so you hear





it a lot. It's not a deal-breaker but more variety on some of the samples would have been nice.

The main cast of each show is generally represented but some of the second string characters get very little prominence. The Archer table is a prime example of this: I'm a big fan of Krieger and I was hoping to see some of his more esoteric creations like Pigsley. His role in the table however is limited to two voice samples; "nope" and "yup", and an LCD screen power-up selection. It's a disappointment but not one

that I can't live with. Just be aware your favourite character might not be represented as much as you'd hoped if they're not the main star.

Overall, despite a few little niggles, I thought Zen did a great job here. It's great fun and if these were real pinball tables then I'd happily stick coins in

them and waste my money by being really awful at pinball. The fact that I only have to pay the equivalent of 24 credits is even better, I've definitely already got my moneys worth in! If you're a fan of pinball and a fan of even a couple of these shows, chances are then you will really like this game. ■



Balls of Glory Pinball

8/10

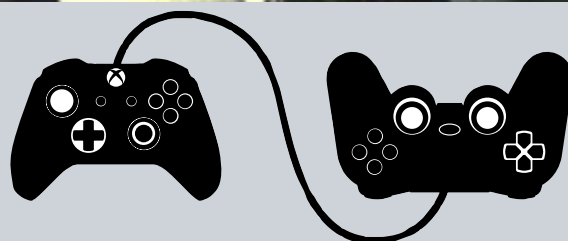
Need For Speed Review

Publisher: Electronic Arts

Developer: Ghost Games

Genre: Racing

Platform: PC, PS4, Xbox One



Release Dates

Out Now (Worldwide)

By Dom D'Angelillo



Like a warm blanket for fans of street racing, The Fast and Furious films and hideously ugly, self customised cars, the Need For Speed series has acted as a way for wannabe teenagers (like myself at one point) to create the car of their dreams. Epitomised during the Underground editions of the series, in recent years the street racing scene

was pushed to one side in favour of high performance vehicles with minimal customisation, but now, and after a year long hiatus, the series returns with the simply titled Need for Speed (2015)

It seems EA has purposely avoided the 'colon noun' formula that has become a feature of the series and the

obvious reason is to avoid confusion. EA clearly didn't want to label Need for Speed (2015) as Most Wanted 2, a sequel to The Run or Underground 3, and instead opted for a relaunch, a return to the drawing board in order to set the series off in a clear, singular direction. Don't let that excite you though, Need for Speed (2015) isn't exactly waving the flag for innovative





driving mechanics, gameplay or offering something new and never seen before. For what it's worth, Need for Speed (2015) is what the Underground games presented, offering an open, perma-dark map, a heavy focus on customisation and a constant threat from those pesky police; all with a current-gen coat of polish.

The first few minutes with EA's series reboot set the tone for your relatively short 6-8 hours of playthrough; awkward but

beautifully presented. Away from the cut-scenes of previous iterations, Need for Speed (2015) opts for live action scenes from a first person perspective. You play an unnamed mute who earns the respect of a local crew, a team of petrol heads who want to be renowned for their skills behind the wheel. It's a brilliant idea in small doses, but quickly becomes a cringeworthy affair of awkward fistbumps and tired cliches, made even worse when one of the five icons from the real

world of car culture is on screen - suffice to say a few acting lessons wouldn't have gone amiss. Small things like being congratulated on your victory even though you came third really break the immersion.

For someone that doesn't speak, you have a lot of friends

The same can be said once you get behind the wheel. Need for Speed (2015) offers a range of vehicles to drive; spanning from humble roadsters,

powerful saloons, American muscle cars, all the way to European supercars, yet aside from the obvious difference in power, they all feel like the same, weightless and easy to handle vehicle. Granted, Need For Speed is not trying to be a realistic simulator, but it would be good to experience the unknown risk of putting your foot down in a Lamborghini Aventador or the heavy turning circle of a 1969 Mustang which would give you different options depending on which events you participate in.

If you've played any number of Need For Speed you're going to be instantly familiar with the types of races on offer; time trials, circuits, sprints and drifts are the core, but each offer different variations, be it targets to reach, competitors to battle it out against or crews to keep up with. Each mode is in theory different, contributing to the game's five different fields of car culture (speed, build, style, crew and outlaw) but other than the XP and story progression, earning for different icons never really feels any different. It would have been good for

EA to allow to the player to perhaps focus on a particular style of driving to save each feeling so watered down.

Races are the usual high speed jostle for position across freeways and narrow streets, and twinned with the eclectic soundtrack of electronic, drum & bass and dub are when the game is at its best and most realistic. Drifting however, is quite the opposite. Previous games made you drift on a specialist track or designated closed road, yet the open world nature of Need For





Speed means your professional skidding is on open roads, quickly becoming nothing more than pile of colliding cars, vying for the same piece of tarmac and leaving a trail of destruction behind them. For what is perhaps the most desirable and niche skill, it's a shame it becomes nothing more than an expensive demolition derby.

Recent Need For Speed games pushed customisation to one side, offering a diluted version of a once rich feature, but EA have doubled down on it this time around giving the

player the tools and leaving them to their own devices. The result is the most in-depth car customisation ever seen in a racing game of this ilk, though it's not exactly smooth sailing and patience is required. The usual combination of things ranging from alloys, body kits, spoilers and hoods can all be upgraded, alongside the tuning side of things where you can add turbos, exhaust systems and the like to increase horsepower. Though don't get your hopes up over fully customising any of the supercars, most remain

untouchable when it comes to altering their bodywork and the like, a big disappointment for fans of those cars.

The biggest change comes in the appearance of vehicles. Unlike previous editions where you had to unlock decals which attached to one part of the car like a persistent stag beetle, Need For Speed's decal and paint options allow for infinite possibilities. Hundreds upon hundreds of shapes, designs, letters, numbers and sponsors can be layered on every inch of your car and all can be scaled,

rotated, stretched and coloured to make the most garish or beautiful vehicle you can possibly imagine. It's a daunting prospect when you first step into the garage and one that I feel could do with holding your hand to some extent, even to the extent of offering small tips and tricks, instead you have to go through trial and error, resulting in frustration.

Ventura Bay is Need For Speed's very own take on a northern California industrial city; high

rising twisty hills merge with straight and fast freeways, gymkhana hot spots open up to narrow suburban districts and all offer a variety of areas to explore and race through. It's a city that somehow is always covered in the inky black of night and despite odd glimpses of dawn in certain areas, it never arrives. It's also something of an empty world, there's never really any glimpse of traffic; bustling freeways or interchanges making Ventura Bay nothing

more than the world's most elaborate race track. And when it comes to the police, after tuning your car, they don't really put up a fight, easily left in your dust in an instant.

Need for Speed's always online feature means that your race times and scores go onto a leaderboard, comparing scores between friends and online opponents. Each time you log on, it connects you into a world with a handful of other drivers. While most of





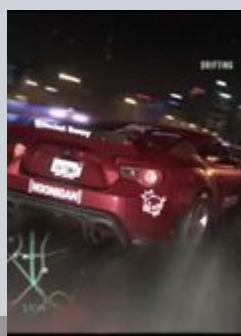
the time you'll remain apart, you can challenge them to head to head races, and that's as far as multiplayer goes. A shallow attempt that makes the always online nature somewhat unnecessary unless more modes will become available further into its existence.

For it's flaws, Need For Speed is a gorgeous game; like an average looking model, you just have to look at it in the right light. Cars are the perfect recreation of their real life selves, not just in appearance but in sound too; a crackle of a blown exhaust, the throaty growl of a turbo, all enough to send shivers down the spine of the most passionate petrolhead.

Everything is intensified in the wet too (which oddly is 95% of the time, despite it never raining) as droplets of water are pushed back by the acceleration, reflections in the black mirror of the road are wonderfully distorted and smoke pours off rear tires during donuts. What's more, your in-game car can be seen in the live action scenes, seamlessly fitting in with real life, regardless of how you've customised your car, a fantastic

new feature I've never seen before and am intrigued to see how it will be used next.

Need for Speed (2015) is far from perfect. In rebranding the series, bringing it back to the basics, it seems to have got lost in the direction it was headed. While it appears as an underground game, there's huge elements of Hot Pursuit and Most Wanted, though it doesn't nail any one feature, flip flopping between high speed races and drifts between shipping containers. It's certainly the best looking street racer to hit consoles, offering fantastic customisation options and an albeit, awkward live action section, but it's quickly dispatched with and is generally very easy. Unfortunately, Need for Speed (2015) suffers from the classic problem of a jack of all trades, master of none making it nothing more than current-gen version of once innovative series. ■



Need For Speed

6.5/10

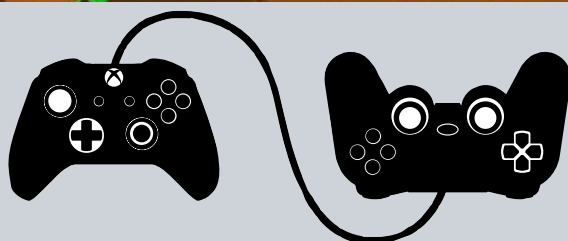
Sonic Lost World Review

Publisher: Sega

Developer: Sonic Team

Genre: Adventure

Platform: PC, Wii U, 3DS



Release Dates

Out Now (Worldwide)

By Andrew Duncan



I have a long-standing love of the character of Sonic the Hedgehog, as shown by my collection of Fleetway Publishing's Sonic The Comic -- issue 1 to 215 (out of 223 issues, missing ~5 of them), and had played every single entry of the franchise from the original all the way until

Nintendo had exclusive rights. So although I may not be able to call myself an authority on the blue spiky one, know that my fanfiction comes from a place of love. Also this review. Maybe don't look up my fanfiction...

Up in the skies above Mobius, Sonic and Tails chase Dr

Robotnik Eggman to rescue some of the tiny animals he uses to power his Badniks. The heroes' biplane is shot down, and they have to make an emergency landing on a floating series of islands known as The Lost Hex. Yes, they appear to be reusing the plot of Sonic The Hedgehog 3, by





having them crash on a strange island, but at least Angel Island didn't start floating until later in the game... Though the airspace over Mobius must be really crowded with Angel Island, multiple Death Eggs, the Lost Hex and that Miracle Planet from Sonic CD...

Sonic Lost World is hard to pin down to one style, as it takes both a 3D and a 2.5D approach to level design -- sometimes actually within the same levels -- but it is a platformer at heart. Needless to say you must track down the villain, this time aided by six ancient monsters called Zeti, and known as The

Deadly Six. They are quite reminiscent of the seven deadly sins, although obviously one down. There doesn't appear to be one representing envy.

As this was originally on the Wii U and 3DS, I did a little research and found that Sonic Team originally began production on Lost World as a PC release, before Nintendo came in with their sacks of cash. Unfortunately, the polish and shine that such a PC release should boast is missing from the cutscenes. They are as entertaining as Sonic should be, even the veiled threat that Sonic was about to kick one

of the Zeti in the nuts, but they appear to be from the 3DS release due to the jagged edges all over the character models. The levels themselves run smoothly and look great, so it's not as if some work hasn't been put in to spruce the game up, especially as it boasts 60 frames per second.

The music also sounds great, though I imagine it did on the Wii U release with a good enough sound system. It's reminiscent of the music from Super Mario Sunshine; very cheery and happy, upbeat to a fault. Even after numerous deaths, I still found it cheering

me up after a few moments.

Given the way gravity works on the Lost Hex, death is almost a certainty. Along with each level being the usual 'this one is grassy, this one is sandy, that one is icy', they are each designed very differently. You might be running across the ground one moment, only to suddenly flip -- meaning you were travelling down a waterfall only to turn around and go up it. The camera ably follows your progress through the levels, which is usually a major complaint of Sonic titles.

Sonic Lost World recommends you play with a controller, and I have to say that I would hate to play this on a keyboard. The camera doesn't require any input, as it is almost always facing the direction you have to go. I have to agree with the decision, as the various worlds are difficult enough to navigate without getting lost to a dodgy camera.

My major gripe with the game is how some levels don't follow the rules of logic which they set out. Loads of objects emit their own gravity, which is how you do the aforementioned upside-



down running. But one level in particular has you running down a tree, and allows you to jump over obstacles coming at you -- fair enough, videogame logic -- but when you mistime a jump, you fall towards the bottom of the screen and die, which bugged the hell out of me.

Sonic Lost World comes bundled with the NIGHTMARE Zone DLC, which is the only non-Nintendo DLC, and is basically a fight against the bosses from the main game, reimagined and meshed together with the bosses from NiGHTS, a Saturn game from Sega. It's a nice addition to the package, especially for fans of that title.

Some of the levels are oddly designed, but as there are some collectibles, and a load of challenges given to you by Omochoa which will give the game some longevity. You'll spend ages wandering around (even longer if you forget to hold down the 'Run' button whilst moving) as you try to locate red emblems, or wall run for the right length of time.

This may not be the miraculous return to the 'greatness' of the original trilogy, but it's a very



fun game. Some of the running sections can feel very on-the-rails, as the controls are literally not required, but they are few. For some it may be on the

easy side, but I've mentioned before that I play games for fun, not for challenges that will snap my controllers. ■



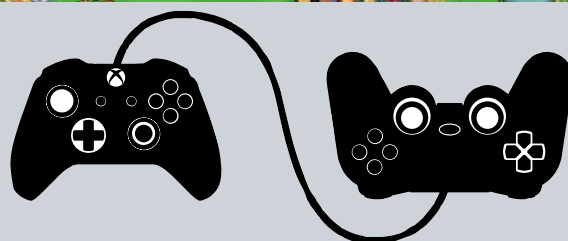
Sonic Lost World

8/10

Swords & Crossbones: An Epic Pirate Story

Swords & Crossbones: An Epic Pirate Story Review

Publisher: Epic Devs LLC
Developer: Epic Devs LLC
Genre: RPG
Platform: PC



Release Dates
Out Now (Worldwide)

By Ben McCurry



Swords & Crossbones: An Epic Pirate Story made me cry myself to sleep. As a game, it serves as an unfortunate message of one of the most crushing aspects of life: you can try and try, but no matter how

much you do, your game still won't come out any good.

This hurts for a number of reasons. It looked so promising from the screenshots, and even when playing the game, there are random flashes of

brilliance that suggest that this game could have been so much more, which breaks my heart. As such, doing this review is a sad and regretful task, like taking Old Yeller outside, but it must be done.



Swords & Crossbones: An Epic Pirate Story



The skeleton of the game are in the strategic battle sections, which are the most plodding, boring aspect of the game. It's similar to Final Fantasy Tactics, yet Final Fantasy Tactics was fun and appealing. The entertainment value is negated by the fact that no real strategy is involved: just walk over to your enemies and attack them until they die. And trust me, they will die, because the game is suffocating in its ease. This is particularly grating as the battling makes up such a large part of the game, to the extent you'll find yourself absolutely dreading the idea that a battle might be around the next

corner. Dull as dishwater and leaves an aftertaste just like it.

Yet, what hurts more is that the writing in the game looked like something potentially great. Swords & Crossbones has some cheerful, delightfully funny and offbeat dialogue that suggests this game would have been a cult hit with some more polish. For instance, in the very beginning, the player character and the woman you're escorting have a conversation about the word "swordy" and how the player character should say something more dashing and "swoony". This is the silly charm that runs

through the game, which, again, disappoints: this package could have been so much more if not let down in the one area that means the most.

The font choices, though, are absolutely disgusting. The game uses standard system fonts, which doesn't sell the idea of piracy or danger. It just says: "I started working for the design team yesterday and I don't know what the fuck I'm doing.". The uniform and sickening staunchness of these fonts clash with the cutesy, stylised graphics: and it might sound like nitpickery here, but all parts of a game inform the



Swords & Crossbones: An Epic Pirate Story



tone of it, even the font. Don't be lazy and say "fuck it, it'll do". Every design choice for a game means something, adding (or in this case, subtracting) something valuable to the mix, and when you skimp on something like this, it takes the player out of the game.

For all the flaws in this game, the graphics themselves are pretty sweet. In that familiar 16-bit style that permeates Steam, *Swords & Crossbones* is remarkably fine-featured and handsome, looking notably detailed and lovely in spite of its pixelated style. The team also excelled themselves in terms of music design, too. If not for

the wretched mode of battling that one must put up with, sitting in the world of *Swords & Crossbones* would have absolutely been a pleasurable experience. For starters, the main theme is one of the best of any indie game this past year: suitably swashbuckling and brilliantly buccaneering, if this game had been differently made, then this could have become anthemic. The rest of the jazzy OST follows suit, and

the game is a genuine pleasure to listen to: if only there had been some continuity between that and the gameplay.

It looked good, it was funny, but it just disappointed in the place where it should have shined. What could have been if the development team just went another way? I try not to think of the prospect as it's just too difficult to ponder. A shame. ■



An Epic Pirate Story

5/10

Football Manager 2016 Review

Publisher: SPORTS INTERACTIVE

Developer: SEGA

Genre: Sports

Platform: PC



Release Dates

Out Now (Worldwide)

By Alex Hamilton



To many, Football Manager is more than a game; it's a passion. I've had complex conversations about tactics, the use of the trequartista and the benefits of a 3-5-2 formation with people I didn't even know, all because of Sports Interactive's seminal series. The latest game to roll off of the Football Manager production line is as packed with tactics, statistics and fine-tuned details

as those before it, but with a few new additions, as well.

Football Manager 2016 seems to be designed to build upon the new systems introduced in the 2015 version of the series. Indeed, many of the things that fans of the series complained about have been tweaked and fixed. Sports Interactive have also made steps to include as many different versions of the

main game as possible, as well as introduce features that many of its customers have called for.

The Football Manager series allows players to take over the helm at almost any football club in the world's top divisions. From player recruitment to scouting to tactics, everything and anything can be at your control. The sheer amount of information presented to



The screenshot shows the 'Profile' tab for a player named Shea, a 24-year-old Irish goalkeeper. The interface is divided into several sections:

- Player Info:** Name (SHEA), Age (24 years old), Date of Birth (16/6/1991), Nationality (IRL), and Status (Uncapped). A small pitch diagram shows the player's position as a Goalkeeper.
- Position & Natural Role:** Position is Goalkeeper, Natural role is Sweeper Keeper.
- Attributes:**
 - Goalkeeping:** Aerial Reach (11), Command Of... (9), Communication (9), Eccentricity (4), First Touch (8), Handling (11), Kicking (10), One On Ones (10), Passing (7), Penalty Taking (1), Reflexes (14), Rushing Out (8), Tendency To... (12), Throwing (10).
 - Physical:** Aggression (7), Anticipation (8), Bravery (13), Composure (12), Concentration (10), Decisions (7), Determination (7), Flair (8), Leadership (11), Off The Ball (5), Positioning (9), Teamwork (9), Vision (8), Work Rate (10).
 - Mental:** Acceleration (12), Agility (10), Balance (9), Jumping Reach (13), Natural Fitness (8), Pace (8), Stamina (5), Strength (8).
- Transfer Info:** Value (£41K), Asking Price (Not set), Squad Status (First Team), Transfer status (not set), Loan status (not set), Bids made (0), Clubs Interested (0).
- Contract:** Contracted to AFC Wimbledon, Full Time Contract, Weekly Wage (£1,000 per week), Contract Start (28/1/2015), Contract End (30/6/2016).
- Report:** Pros (green bar), Cons (red bar), and a star rating (4 stars).

the player can be staggering – something that newcomers to the series may struggle with – but Football Manager 2016 also offers a number of tooltips and tutorials to help players familiarise themselves with the interface. Admittedly, it's tough to judge the game on these merits as a veteran of the series – the UI experienced a major shift in Football Manager 2014, which has given regulars time to adjust.

Other changes have occurred in the man management side of the game. Football Manager has always aimed to make your players feel like human beings with wants, needs and feelings.

Drop a veteran striker in favour of a fresh-faced youngster and he might knock on your (proverbial) office door to have a word with you about respect. In previous iterations of the series, however, these little tiffs with players could erupt into full mutinies from key players and staff, no matter what your style of management. This feature has seen some work and now it feels far more fluid. Players will stick up for mates and favoured personnel but couldn't care less about some 17-year-old in the reserves who feels like he should be in the first team.

Transfers, player negotiations and scouting have all been

tweaked further, pushing the role of player agents into the background. Now the focus is on the interaction between you and the players, and befriending a rival team's striker can really pay off when you sign him for a massively reduced wage.

Sports Interactive appear to have taken a more streamlined approach to the meat and bones of the game when adjusting the tactics. Previous games confronted budding managers with a dizzying array of sliders, drop-down menus and checkboxes without really explaining what each modification actually did. 2016 aims to make tweaking your

system that little bit simpler by giving players a more graphical display of what their choices mean. Arrows and plot markers will show where players will run and balls will be played, making on-the-fly adjustments simpler.

These changes can be supremely satisfying when you watch them play out in the new and improved 3D match engine. Often derided by series veterans, the match engine has seen a welcome overhaul. Gone are players sliding over the pitch like motor-powered figure skaters and janky, robotic passes and touches. Now players react and move far more realistically, making watching the games unpredictable and entertaining.

More than a thousand extra animations were added to the game according to the developers. That attention to detail has paid dividends - goals look more life-like, fluid and realistic while general play is more intuitive and believable. Stadia have also been given a seeing-to and look far more fleshed out than in previous games. Flags, banners and flares animate the crowd while little touches like rusting pylons or peaceful country lanes in the background all help add to the atmosphere on matches and make the player feel like they are really there.

Another feature added to Football Manager 2016 is the ability to create your own club.

Design a crest, kit and history and assign real-life players or your own. The new mode gives those who want to play with their pub team or university society the chance to see how they'd fare in the professional world. It's a feature many have called for, not really expecting it to appear. Indeed, the mode does feel slightly like a luxury item added to give the game that extra boost in sales.

Setting up a team takes a lot of concentrated and concerted effort, and the rewards are often slightly stale when you realise it's just the base game with your own made-up names.

Also newly introduced mode in Football Manager 2016 is one that allows you to mould

75%

Best At Hitting Target

Iván Calero

Top Goalscorer

Reuben Reid

29

97

Most Key Passes

Jack Dunn

Most Assists

Wes Burns

10

3.18

Most Dribbles / Match

Febian Brandy

Most Distance / 90 Min

Callum Evans

14.07km

8.68

Most Tackles / Match

Dannie Bulman

Most Key Tackles

Aaron Pierre

40

14

Most Clean Sheets

Matt Ingram

Least Conceded

Roy Carroll

29

GOALS >

			NAI	AGE	GOALS
1st			Reuben Reid Plymouth	ENG 27	29
2nd			Matt Iubbs Portsmouth	ENG 31	24
3rd			Paul Mullin Morecambe	ENG 21	21
4th			Kudus Oyenuga Hartlepool	ENG 23	19
5th			Kevin Osei Carlisle	GHA 24	18
6th			Iván Calero Stevenage	ESP 20	16
=			Shaun Batt Barnet	ENG 29	16
8th			Billy Kee Accrington	NIR 25	15

your own manager. Unlike the other, welcomed new features however, this one feels rather tacked on at the end of the development cycle. The player models in Football Manager aren't exactly going to win any awards but Sport Interactive appear to have thought seeing the monstrosity that is the player model up front was a good idea. You can choose from a number of outfits, hairstyles and physical attributes to change the way your manager looks but in the end you'll always end up wanting the finished article as far away from your eyes as possible. Thankfully the manager is often deposited across the pitch out of sight and out of mind.

Sports Interactive have also made an effort to improve the multiplayer side of Football Manager. The developers have introduced the new Draft mode, where participants can select their squad from a pool of real-life players – much like a fantasy league – and battle it out to decide who the best manager is. The mode supports up to 12 simultaneous players, meaning that a full league can be created and played without repetitive



matches making it dull. Whether players will have the patience to gather eleven friends, get them to sit down for an evening and commit to a full season is another thing altogether.

Football Manager 2016 is another successful entry into a series that is perhaps struggling to find new things to innovate. Changes to tactics, player interaction and the 3D match engine are much welcomed and definitely mark an improvement

from last year's game. On the other hand, though, Sports Interactive's striving for new and innovative ways to play their sports sim could be their undoing. Too many cooks spoil the broth, after all. In the end though, as Alan Partridge famously said: 'the proof is in the pudding and the pudding in this case is football'. Football Manager 2016 will keep fans of the series more than happy (that is until 2017 rolls off the production line next year). ■



Football Manager 2016

8.5/10

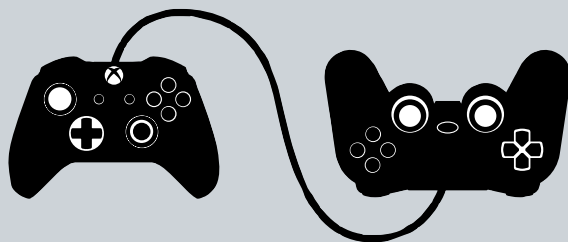
Halo 5: Guardians Review

Publisher: Microsoft Studios

Developer: 343 Industries

Genre: Action

Platform: Xbox One



Release Dates

Out Now (Worldwide)

By Calum Parry



Microsoft's flagship franchise Halo has now officially hit their next-generation console and while the ill-fated Master Chief Collection had an abundance of problems from the beginning. The next iteration in the series has gone smoothly. This is Halo 5: Guardians.

Developed by 343 Industries, Halo 5: Guardians takes place less than a year after the events of Halo 4. Master Chief makes his return along with his devoted team of Spartan comrades in search of his closest companion Cortana, who may still be alive. However, this story isn't all about our iconic John-117.

The focus is on the team sent to find and retrieve the Chief, one way or another. From the get-go we are introduced to some impressive in-game cinematics that give an over-the-top introduction to team Osiris, a new team of Spartans lead by Jameson Locke. Drop-jumping from a pelican and sliding down a mountain, the





team skillfully takes down the Covenant in a blaze of gunfire and explosions, but once you hit the ground and you're handed the controls things take a step back and from here it is difficult to talk anymore of the story without revealing too much.

The issue isn't about giving away the plot or spoiling; it's simply because Halo 5 is disappointingly short. The dedicated fans of the series's lore and history will appreciate the story the most, many of us making their return to the franchise, will be left somewhat baffled due to the lack of

direction in story. Clocking in at around five hours on Normal difficulty, there isn't much worth talking about. It's good, but not great and with it being so short; it feels catered to those who like to play on the harder difficulties; especially for those going for Legendary as there are enough close quarters and open spaces for a variety of combat.

With the focus on Halo 5's campaign being co-operation you'll be working within a team of four, player-controlled or AI, if solo. Co-op has been a standpoint for the franchise, but what is bizarrely lacking within

Halo 5 and which removes a lot of the fundamental enjoyment from the game is the lack of split screen. Now, this may not affect all players out there, and we know that newer titles are slowly removing this feature, but within a franchise, that stood proud by having co-op and multiplayer split screen it just doesn't feel right.

Playing solo I found my playthrough rather irritating in some places. At first it was fine, I was perfectly capable of pushing ahead with little to no help from my AI comrades, which are pretty useless unless

you continuously give out orders to move or attack using the d-pad. Further on however, when things started ramping up, you feel punished for not working co-operatively. When downed you can be picked up by allies, but this became such a hindrance when relying on AI. Finding myself ahead of them most of the time, by the time they reached me to revive, they'd usually end up getting downed themselves which resulted in me having to restart the checkpoint and babysit my useless team. Still, not an issue if you play with a group players online who

work together, but for many like myself who don't always have that option it only makes things more heart-wrenching when there is no split screen.

Having it not featured for the next-generation is a let-down and the reason for this is Microsoft's focus upon having 60FPS. 343 Industries have developed a more advanced engine to handle the new set frame rate. Having a consistent 60 throughout the entire campaign is an impressive technical feat, but it does come at a cost.

Visually speaking Halo 5 is a beautiful game, the best in the series. The environments, skyboxes, weapons are impressive in their detail and geometry, but only to a certain extent. With the keeping the frame rate locked, a lot of design choices have been made and the level of detail suffers as a result. Combined with a tight field of view, everything within close range is highly detailed, but beyond you start seeing its shortfalls. This is not say that other games don't do this, but in Halo 5 it's different and can only be seen as technical limitation of the Xbox One. The most jarring of which is enemy animations, which even at a close proximity run at half the frame rate. Many may not notice at first, but once you do it's distracting and off-pointing, but with fast paced action and movement you'll soon get accustomed to it.

The gameplay within Halo 5: Guardians is perhaps the most satisfying in the series to date. Your Spartan is kitted out with some awesome new abilities, which improves mobility and offensive capabilities. You'll be able to boost a short distance, mantle on ledges, sprint and



slide. Offensively you can build up momentum from a sprint and charge into your enemies and the same from above with a powerful ground pound, which when timed just right can decimate. They have also introduced the ability to aim down sight (ADS) called smart-link, which could suggest that Halo is going the way of other first person shooters and isn't right, but Halo 5 does this differently. When using smart-link any hit taken will flinch your character out of the mode, so it's worth only using for quick precision shots. Not only that, you can also use smart-link to hover in the air for short period of time.

Combined with this everything else is kept in line with entire series, and the additional improvements are built on top of solid gameplay that the series has been known for. This brings everything neatly to the component many will purchase for: multiplayer, or should I say multiplayers, as there is now two and both are played different from one another. You've got your traditional Halo Arena multiplayer, featuring all the modes all the fans will remember fondly, and I can



happily say that its launch went very smoothly with very little interruption, unlike The Master Chief Collection which was cursed with issues for months. If this had happened with 5 it would have been a true disservice to the fans and worrying for the future - especially considering its release so close to Black Ops 3 and Battlefront.

Fortunately this isn't the case and the multiplayer is a blast. Up to eight players can fight as Red or Blue in Team Arena, Slayer, Swat etc. The interesting one of these mode is Breakout

which has been heavily advertised as the mode for pros. It's round based, you've got one life and you either capture the flag or eliminate the opposing team. All the team modes are skill-based, meaning that after playing ten matches on each mode, you'll be matched with a qualified rank, once qualified you'll be matched with players at your skill level. Arena is hectic, good old fashion Halo combat that will have you coming back for more - at least for me it was. That is if I could break away from Halo 5's most interesting addition: Warzone.



HALO 5

G U A R D I A N S



Warzone is multiplayer on a large-scale. Featuring up to 24-players (12 vs 12) in big battlefields containing AI-controlled components and bases that must be captured. Each team has their own start-off base and more can be captured to control territory. The AI components can be mini-bosses dotted throughout the map, taking down these reward victory points. In order to win you have to either reach 1000 victory points or destroy the enemy team's core. This mode also features the new requisition system, which can provide you with weapons, vehicles and other equipment to use within the warzone - they are of course just a way to get microtransactions into the

game, but fortunately they are easy enough to unlock without the need to pay. Warzone is good fun, matches can last a great length of time and it's certainly the highlight of Halo 5's multiplayer. Outside of multiplayer, just like before you can customise your Spartan with variety of colours, helmets and armors, but the way to unlock these is done with the same requisition system.

Despite its shortfalls Halo 5: Guardians still holds strong as

being an excellent contender as the current best shooter available for Xbox One. After all it is Microsoft's flagship title, but with a short lackluster story that only the diehard fans will appreciate, the multiplayer is truly where the focus is. 60FPS makes a world of difference and is here to stay with the franchise, but I just hope that they take the feedback from the community and make things better in the next installment. ■



Halo 5: Guardians

7.5/10

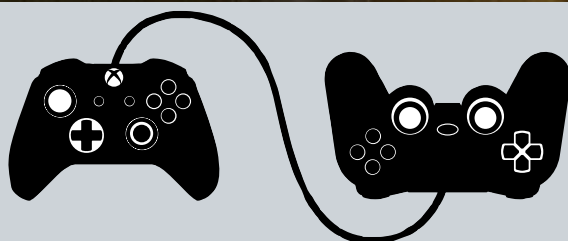
I Can't Escape: Darkness Review

Publisher: Fancy Fish Games

Developer: Fancy Fish Games

Genre: Adventure

Platform: PC



Release Dates

Out Now (Worldwide)

By Ben McCurry



If you have been feeling a particular itch to dungeon-crawl lately, I Can't Escape: Darkness may just be the cure. Purporting itself as a "quicksand trap for the senses", it's a game where you try and make your escape out of a dank and creepy dungeon using the tools around you

and the most important item in your inventory: your own wits. How could it go wrong?

Easy. Take a good concept like that and funnel it into one of the most dull, treacle-slow, and headache-inducing experiences of the year. The concept that you're trying to escape a deep,

dark dungeon is a great idea, and this is all held together with puzzles. For instance: you may only progress to the next level of the dungeon if you find the right type/shape of key for the door. Along the way, you may run into obstacles or monsters that you can beat with a stick. Solid idea, but how does it go so wrong?





To begin with, the graphics are atrocious. A lot of gamers aren't snobby about graphics and will batter on with games regardless of how they look, but I Can't Escape made my eyes want to vomit. The graphics appear to be hand-drawn, except the hand doing the drawing of those graphics appeared to have no skill or even a wider notion of how things are meant to look. This game is supposed to have a creepy, foreboding atmosphere, but it just can't be taken seriously with how goofy rats and ghosts look. Sure, there was an attempt to make them scary, but they end up looking

like something H.R. Giger's slow brother would draw. As they stand, the graphics are a disappointing mess. One might compare them to the early Elder Scrolls games, but that's an act of generosity.

I Can't Escape also purports itself to be a horror game, but the atmosphere within is lousy, so much so that the developers have to convince you to turn off the lights in order to play the game. That's a decent idea on a superficial level, but (1) it suggests that they can't make their own atmosphere and have to rely on what is

basically mood lighting and (2) the scariest games ever made were still horrifying at a base level, even if you were playing them in broad daylight – Silent Hill 2, Condemned, and Barbie's Horse Adventures; these are terrifying games that transcend setting. Played in broad daylight, I Can't Escape is laughable as a horror game. The scariest thing about this game is that it cost £8.99; for roughly the same cost of Fable: The Lost Chapters and a pound less than Skyrim, you can wander around a shit dungeon while you question all the choices in your life so far.



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Worst still are the controls, which are stiffer than a Don Draper drink. You navigate yourself using the WASD layout; while Q and E will turn you left and right respectively. Instead of moving freely like 99.99% of games released today, you instead move on a grid, which feels obstructive to your field of view, and you can't manoeuvre yourself around as lithely as you'd like, which is of key importance when things like rats are on the attack. A standard WASD and mouse approach would have fit the game much better, but this control scheme slows the pace right down in the worst way.

To give the devil his due, I Can't Escape is a mild, baby success as an adventure game. You

wander about each floor of the dungeon looking for clues, keys, and anything you can use to get yourself out, and this works quite well, as the challenge of navigating the dungeon and hunting out items is fun to an extent. The problem is, because all the other components of the game let the final product down, this feels worse for it, too. I can't get into the admittedly solid adventuring because the controls are so stiff, and the design is absolutely rancid. It's a shame, because when adventuring through the

dungeon, you get the forlorn sense that the game could have been so much more.

This hurts, because if I Can't Escape had done a number of easy things right, we'd be on the business end of a good game. As it stands, though, this is a mess, and to go back to a previous point: something like Fable or Skyrim stand as better games for around the same price. Be clear: the only darkness this provides is a dark stain on this developer's record. ■



I Can't Escape: Darkness

4.5/10

200% Mixed Juice! Review

Publisher: Fruitbat Factory

Developer: Orange_Juice

Genre: RPG

Platform: PC



Release Dates

Out Now (Worldwide)

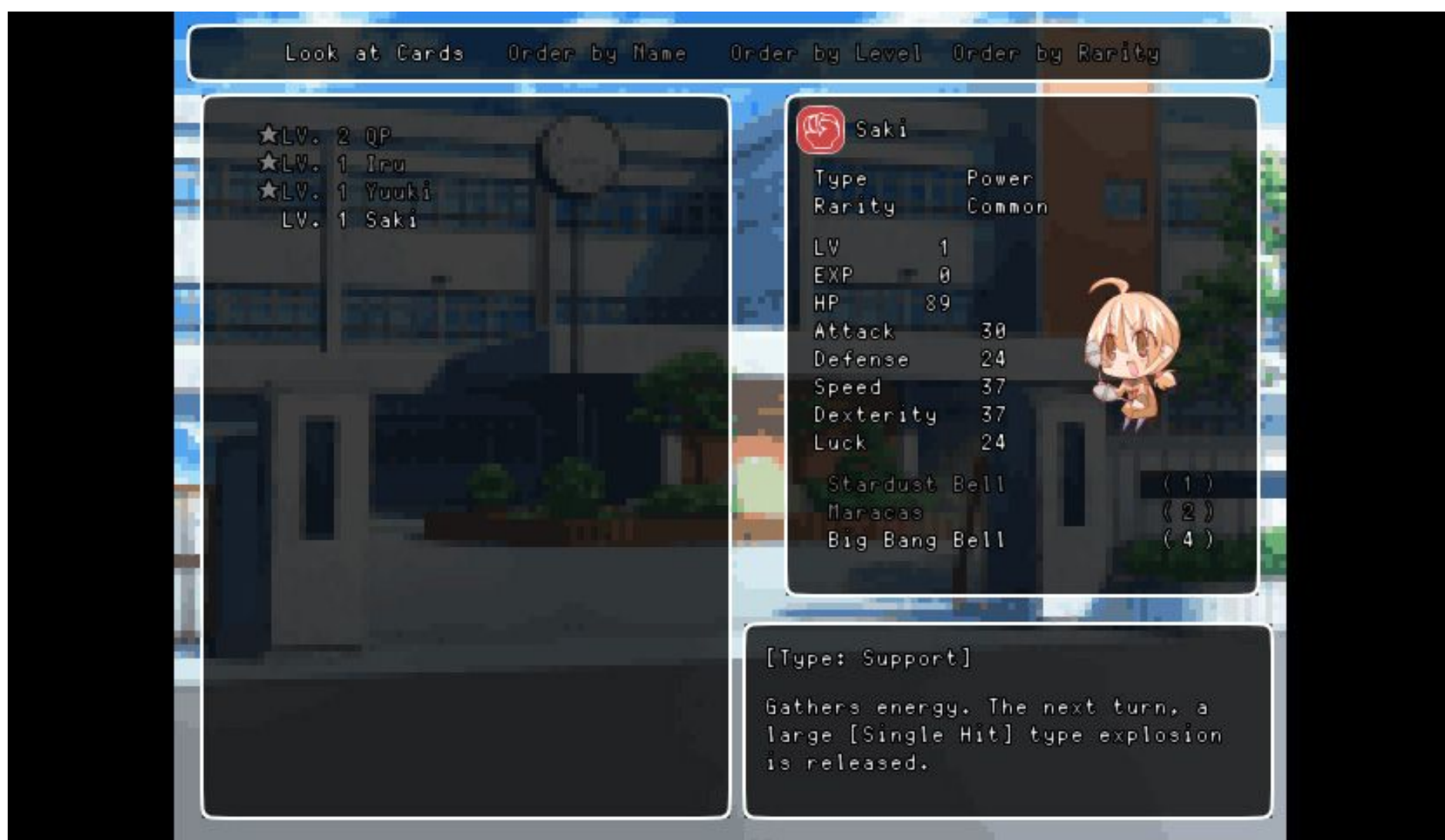
By Ben McCurry

Being a games critic is a funny job. Sometimes, after the long flows of weird and wonderful games we're subjected to, we have to just take a minute to ask, "Where do you get these ideas?!" 200% Mixed Juice! is by no means one of the weirdest

games out there, but another in a long line of "What the hell were you smoking?" games.

Essentially, 200% Mixed Juice is a visual novel where the plot is advanced through an RPG battling system, told using pre-existing characters from

a bevy of other games. In this sense, it's like a C-list version of Sm4sh or Jump Ultimate Stars with characters from games you'd never heard of – initially, I thought that I must have been living under a Dwayne Johnson, but no, the characters themselves are





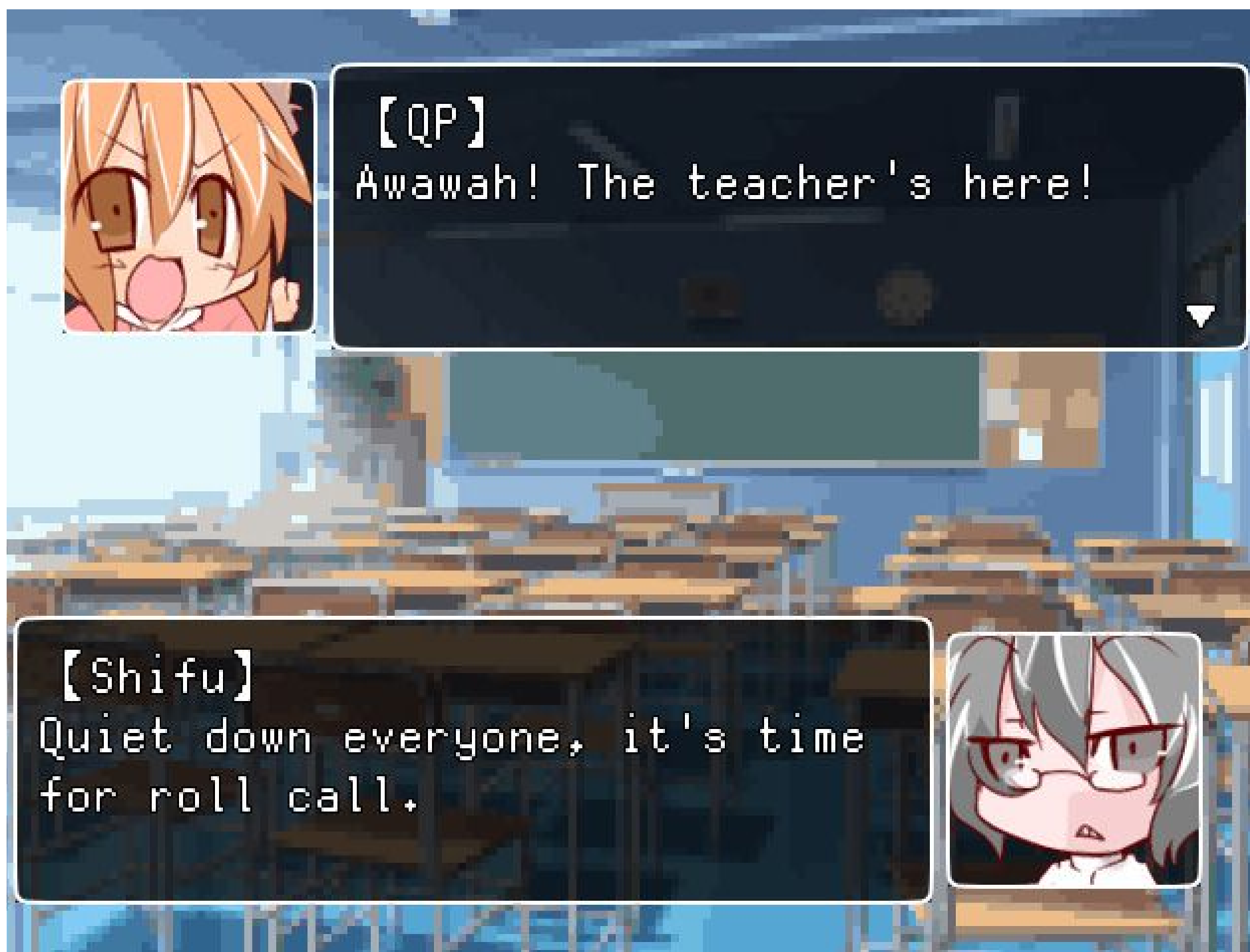
esoteric. The inclusion of these characters was, in the minds of the developers, a major draw (they come from the developer's own 100% franchise, which has made as big a splash as a stone in the ocean) but they don't add anything special or interesting to proceedings.

The plot itself is a bit of an unrefined mess, but this doesn't make the game any the worse for it. You play as the creatively named Protagonist – no, really, that's your name – and you have absolutely zip for social skills, even as far as being mute,

on account of the world being created anew for you by fairy godmother and game master of this trainwreck, (stop me if you think you've heard this one before...) Navi. Your goal is to befriend people in this world to fight for you, and in doing so, you get taken on a whirlwind trip not just through the world created by Navi, but through other parallel dimensions as you endeavour to help others. Got all that? Yes, 200% Mixed Juice makes as much sense as a MLP fanfic written by a teenager delirious on LSD, but for some mad, impossible

reason, it works. This story is not meant to be a well written, emotional tour-de-force. It feels like it's made up as it goes along, with characters thrown into the mix at random; this makes the game a bit of a novelty rather than a serious GOTY contender, but this level of narrative cheapness adds a trashy sort of quality to the game that makes it stand out.

However, the real meat of the game comes with the battle system, which is conversely well-executed and planned out. You begin the battle with the



rolling of a standard six-sided die, which dictates the number of skill points you earn for that round. These dictate the kinds and power of attack you can do. These attacks also have a 'type' in the form of rock, paper, or scissors, and both characters and attacks will be engendered with a type. Ideally, if your opponent is the rock type, you'll want to hit them with paper, but think carefully. If you're scissors, they'll want to use a rock move – so the best course of action

is to sometimes think ahead and preempt the opponent in order to win the round, even if you do less damage as a result: going first is absolutely key. As such, the battle system in 200% Mixed Juice is slick and ends up being the backbone of the whole game. If you're a serious, po-faced type who doesn't have time for such nonsense as jokes and silliness, then the solid and engrossing battle system will draw you in.

The third, perhaps less distinguished, wing of the game is the "collect-'em-all" card component. The visual novel component of the game gets you to befriend NPCs so they will fight for you: once you have their friendship, you earn their character card, which can be levelled up to your liking. In total, the game has 100 or so cards to collect, which you get either through the story, or, more likely, by purchasing them from a random machine



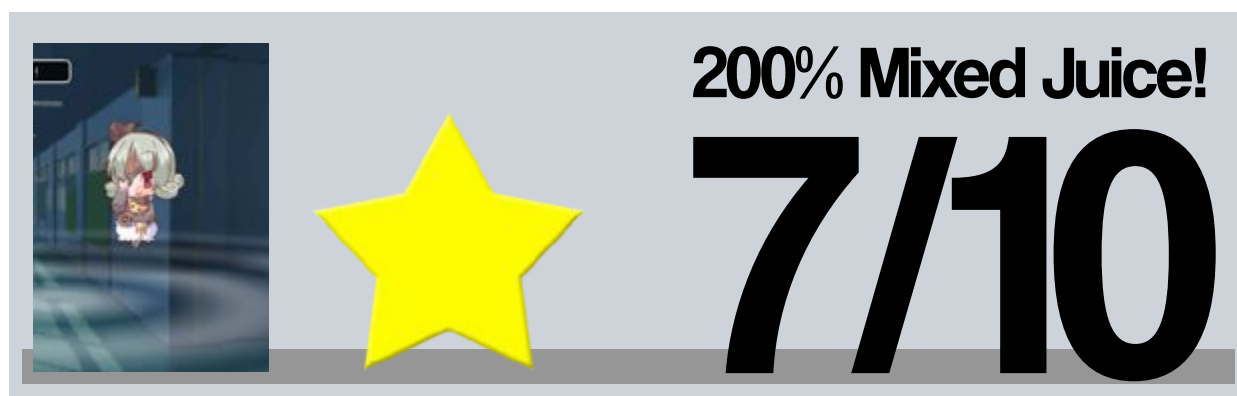
with the in-game currency earned from battle. This adds a little extra mileage to the game, especially if you don't care about the story.

The graphics here are done half right: 200% Mixed Juice isn't visually sharp, looking distinctly like an attempt at rendering an image on a Game Boy Advance screen. Everything is done in 2D, which means badly pixelated .jpgs as background images (seriously; come on, lads) while also creating space for some well-drawn anime-style art, with the

characters being rendered in super-deformity; this is perhaps the cutest part of the game. Otherwise, much like the story, the game is a bit of a blended mess in terms of visual style.

200% Mixed Juice is a mixed bag. The RPG battling is solid, and if you're not bothered by a story that does whatever it

wants, you'll find humour in its plot. Really, it's a solid game, but your enjoyment of it will strictly be up to what kind of person you are and how much you can really tolerate in games. I predict this will be a Marmite title, truly divisive but those that are willing to strap themselves in for the ride will enjoy the experience. ■



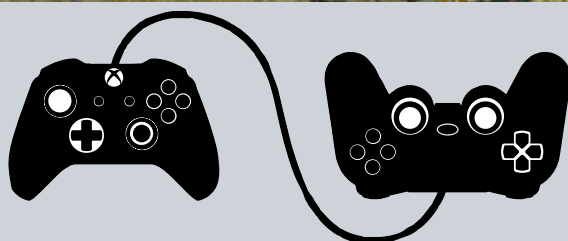
Grand Ages: Medieval Review

Publisher: Fruitbat Factory

Developer: Gaming Minds Studios

Genre: Strategy

Platform: PC



Release Dates

Out Now (Worldwide)

By Alex Hamilton



If you were flying blind going into your time with Grand Ages: Medieval, you might be forgiven for thinking that this game would turn out to be a Total War-a-like. Indeed, the preview pictures feature a number of sumptuous shots of medieval towns and armies marching to battle. That's not the case, though. Yes there

are battles, armies and shiny-looking villages but this title is all about the power of trade and commerce in medieval Europe.

Developed by Gaming Minds, the game is an economy simulator at its heart. You take control of a merchant operating in a European town and set about building your empire

through the means of supply and demand. The game does dabble in combat, strategy and exploration, too, but only momentarily, before dragging you back into the world of trade routes and currency exchange.

Grand Ages: Medieval, to give it its due, does a good job of introducing you to the basic





mechanics. The single player campaign revolves around a noble family from the ailing Byzantine Empire in 1050 and serves as your main tutorial and proof of concept. There is some narrative there as well and it offers a decent amount of twists, but never more than enough to keep the player coming back to the campaign once they've got the grasp of the mechanics.

Starting a sandbox game presents you with the wide open space of Europe in which

to start your adventure. At the beginning you have one merchant, one town and one scout. Players will need to explore to discover neutral towns and the major trading players in the continent. Trade carts can be managed, as well as their cargo, but the game provides some good tools for creating routes that can pass through most of your target cities on the way.

Neutral towns that you discover can be won over to your cause over time if you exchange

enough resources with them or bribe them with enough cash. If bribery and expansion into pre-determined routes aren't your thing, the player also has the option to send out settlers to create their own villages and towns. This can be a useful tool to reach resources and commodities that your trade empire lacks. You'll also receive an extra merchant for every town you take over.

There's a tech tree, too, which opens up upgrades for your towns that can increase

your prosperity, upgrade your units and generally improve your efficiency.

Manipulating the market is where *Grand Ages: Medieval* comes into its own. Trade and demand are simulated well, and there is a certain satisfaction that can be had when you flood the market with cheap pottery and watch your rival's flourishing network wither and die as people flock to your empire.

The game's interface makes it relatively easy to switch between income, expenditure

and other vital information. The player will never be flustered trying to find their stats, and, with the financials being so integral to the game, it's no wonder Gaming Minds have ensured that it's easy to see what is going where.

As you expand you're bound to come across rivals and enemies who will vie for trade domination of Europe. Combat in the game, however, lacks any real depth. There are multiple different units you can recruit and deploy – all of which operate under the familiar rock-paper-scissors

system that RTS fans will know well. Despite this system, though, it's often the side with the largest army that wins.

As someone who is a massive fan of combat-orientated strategy games, the fact that once you have a burgeoning treasury there's actually very little to do left me somewhat bored. *Grand Ages: Medieval*, though distinctly of *Crusader Kings* and *Total War* style, seems more like an intricate 4X version of *Civilization* much of the time. The problem is that the combat in *Civilization* is probably more satisfying.





Graphically the game won't win any prizes but does the job with impeccable efficiency. The overworld map of Europe can at times look gorgeous, especially when it's bustling with your trade caravans. The towns and cities can look very quaint and pretty, especially those surrounded by mountains, forests and lakes. The armies and soldiers are detailed, and remind me slightly of units in Age of Empires III. The game's music and sound never inspire, but never exactly disappoint, either. Much like

many aspects of the game they are middling at best.

Grand Ages: Medieval can be thought of as an acquired taste (much like the fine wine I peddled around my Alpine trade routes). The mechanics are intuitive and work well, allowing players to get to grips with them

and excel with enough practice and micromanagement. The game's simplistic combat and relative lack of variety will probably mean very few come back to it after their first foray. Yet, if you're looking for something more relaxing when it comes to your 4X strategy, this game might be for you. ■



Grand Ages: Medieval

7/10

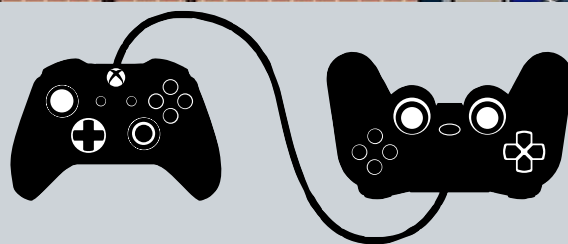
Sir! I'd Like to Report a Bug Review

Publisher: Lord Puggington Games

Developer: Lord Puggington Games

Genre: Action

Platform: PC



Release Dates

Out Now (Worldwide)

By Cat Swinburn



There's nothing quite like the smug satisfaction of encountering a bug in a game. Encountering a bug in real life, however, would be far more cumbersome. So it is for our protagonist, couch-potato games tester Reggie, who realises that due to some

freaky technological error, game bugs have wormed their way into his daily commute to and from work. Reggie must survive an increasingly hostile 2D platformer environment on his way to work, report the bugs, and survive the journey home again.

But, in classic 2D platformer fashion, the game is frustratingly hard. And Sir! I'd Like to Report a Bug is hair-tearing, face-clawing, rage-inducingly tough. So tough in fact that most of the updates and adjustments to date are the developers desperately





Sir! I'd Like to Report a Bug

trying to quell the cries of their fans, and make the game just a little easier with an easy mode, and by calming down some particularly aggressive obstacles.

Lord Puggington Games boast their "very shiny pixel art". I'm afraid I must burst their bubble by saying it is fairly lacklustre pixel art. Although I have nothing against old-school, grainy pixelated graphics, Sir! is a bit too rough around the edges. It is very difficult to distinguish platforms that can be jumped onto with the background, which often results in random leaping and flailing as you figure out how to reach a taller building while

the sun spits fireballs of death at your behind. Eventually, you realise that you must jump from that tiny blue mailbox, to a red phone box, and upwards. By then, you have probably already been incinerated.

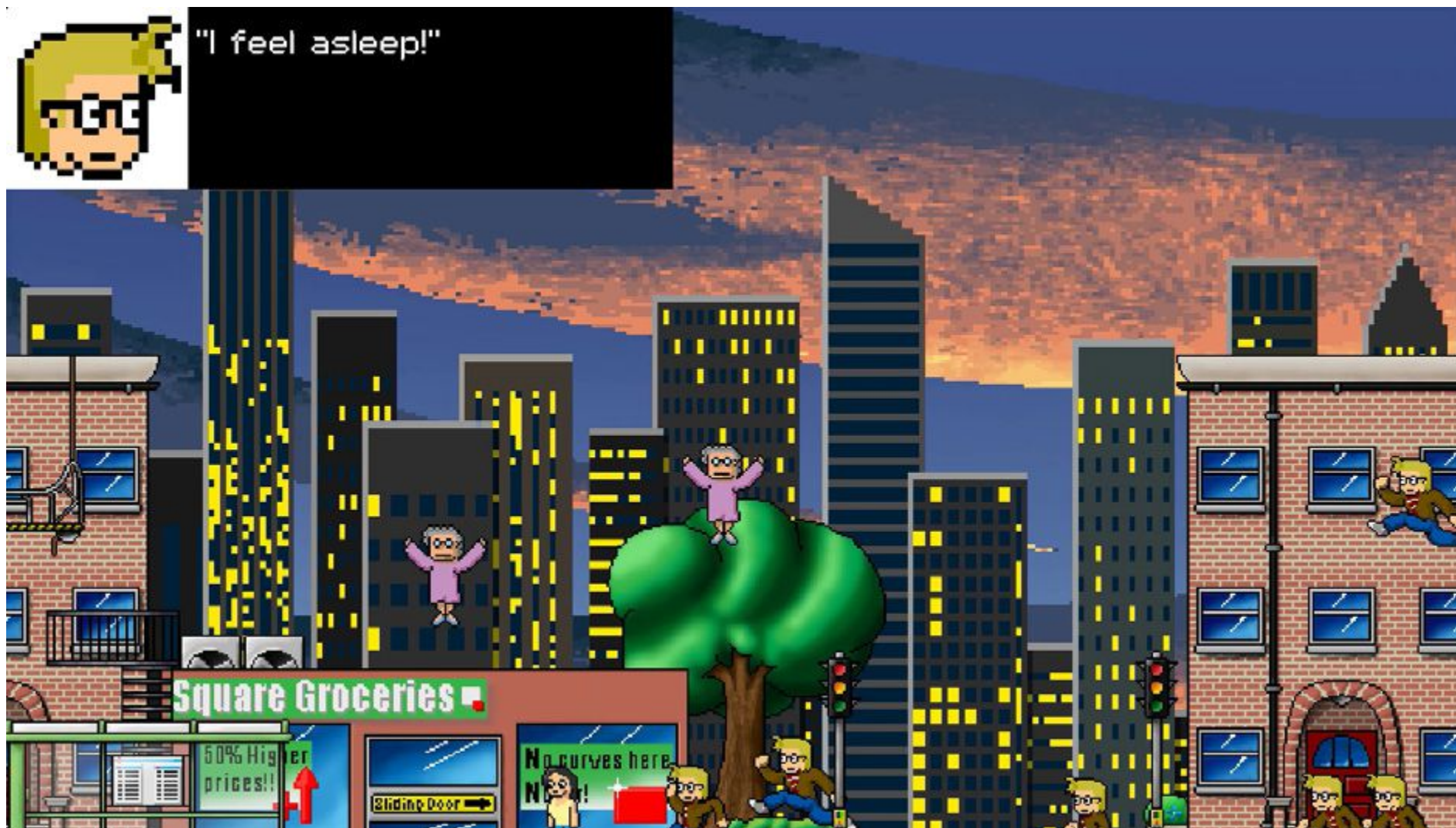
Rage. And when rain or money or other various substances begin to fall from the sky, you can forget about being able to see where you're going. Cue more frantic leaping. And more death. So much more death.

When (if) you make it to your workplace, you are presented with a screen of possible bugs that you may submit. Some are very witty, and you'll find plenty of game references in there that will be sure to make

you crack a smile. Once you have found and submitted the bugs you encountered on the level you have just passed, time progresses and you must commute once more.

The level is the same each time, but also entirely different. Different bugs, different scenarios, and different obstacles. There is even a "The Floor is Lava" level; bring on the nostalgia! At one point, everything is blue. The soundtrack alters slightly here and there, but not enough; it becomes extremely repetitive, and despite Lord Puggington Games' pleas to turn the volume up, I find myself instead turning my





volume off. I didn't even notice that one level is soundless.

Sir! originated as an Android game, and made the leap onto PC. As I understand it, the android controls are frankly horrible, and although they are very simple on the PC, they don't fare much better. They are not nearly responsive enough, and game frustration should never stem from dodgy controls. And unfortunately, here, it often does. Leaping from one tiny, hard-to-see obstacle to another is difficult enough, without it being sluggish to boot.

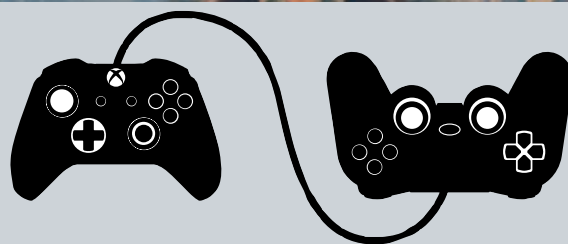
Thankfully, the game is fairly short, spanning over a week in the life of Reggie. The Thursday level really sums the game up; everything in the environment suddenly begins to fling itself at you, killing you on impact. And this is when you realise that all this time, the whole world has been out to get you. The world wants you dead. And more times than one, the world is going to succeed.

In all, Sir! I'd Like to Report a Bug is witty, steeped with game references and is definitely challenging. I played it entirely in easy mode, for the checkpoints, and I found it difficult enough. It is, at times, too difficult, but in fairness, it never pretends to be anything but a challenge. The soundtrack and graphics are lacking, but the premise of the game is entertaining. ■



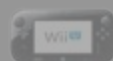
Assassin's Creed Syndicate Review

Publisher: Ubisoft
Developer: Ubisoft
Genre: Action-Adventure
Platform: PC, PS4, Xbox One



Release Dates
Out Now (Worldwide)

By Dom D'Angelillo



As a series, Assassin's Creed is hugely divisive. Like the Templars and Assassins themselves, there are two sides locked in constant battle regarding the annual series. While last year's iteration, Assassin's Creed Unity was somewhat of a disappointment,

falling back into the hands of the Templars, Assassin's Creed: Syndicate, has to some extent righted the wrongs of its French Revolutionary brother. It ditches multiplayer altogether, removes unnecessary clutter and, from my experience, there were no cases of floating eyeballs and

hair. All of this counts towards not just the best Assassin's Creed experiences on current-gen consoles, but one of the most enjoyable additions to the series altogether.

Assassin's Creed: Syndicate plunges you into Victorian





London, at the height of the Industrial Revolution, and the pinnacle of societal divides as the rich exploited the poor, the sick and the young. Jacob and Evie Frye, two young assassins from the outskirts of the capital vow to make a difference by bringing down Crawford Starrick, a man with his fingers in many industrial pies and who happens to be a Templar Grand Master, pulling the strings with the help of an elusive Piece of Eden. It's the standard Assassin's Creed narrative and the nine sequences that form the game involve the Frye twins, piece-by-piece, taking out various accomplices of Starrick. Of course, as has become expected with this series, there

is a modern-day tale that you keep coming back to, though it is only for brief moments at a time and doesn't interject from the running, jumping and killing too much, but feels forced and unnecessary at times.

As protagonists go, Jacob and Evie are among the most likeable in the series and the game is at it's best when the two are bickering like siblings do. They are wonderfully acted and are removed from the often rather woody and one dimensional characters of past games like Conor and Arno. Ultimately, Jacob and Evie want the same thing, but they want to do it differently. Jacob is the 'all guns blazing' type who wants

to head straight to the top of the pyramid and dethrone the Grand Master by any means. His sister on the other hand, is much more by the book and level headed; the difference is reflected in the initial character specific missions and stats, but in terms of gameplay there is no real difference between the two.

Jacob's tutorial has you derailing a train while Evie's sees her stealing a key and looking for a hidden laboratory, but once the city of London opens up for you to explore at your own will, the path that Ubisoft have laid for each character can be forgotten entirely. The game allows you to switch between both twins on the fly and attempt missions

Assassin's Creed Syndicate

with either (though there are a few exceptions during each sequence) but essentially, you can play however you want with whoever you want. XP is earned simultaneously between characters, saving you from unnecessary grinding, but the upgrades are the same for the most part with the odd Jacob or Evie exception. Once fully upgraded though, either twin is the lethal assassin you will be familiar with and is ideal for either a stealth or kamikaze playing style. It's a great foundation for a mechanic that

the series has been screaming out for, paving the different class types in future additions.

Victorian London itself is a million miles away from the Renaissance decor of 16th century Italy, revolutionary Paris or the slums of the crusade struck Middle East, but it stands proud as yet another dense, varied and complex world to traverse. From the top of Big Ben, to the terraced houses of Lambeth, the world is full of paths to explore, buildings to scale and people to stab in the

face. Atop a docked boat on the densely packed Thames you can see the very diversity of society, one side is the billowing smoke of factory upon factory, the other: Buckingham Palace, Saint Paul's Cathedral and the bloated corner of upper class London. It's a yet another huge map where fast travelling (unlocking synchronization points) or horse and cart will be your friend, but it's worth exploring and taking in the beauty of a relatively ugly period of time by traversing the rooftops.





Ubisoft have made scaling buildings and jumping from roof-to-roof much easier and quicker this time around. The classic single button free-running up, and the recent free-running down return as you would expect, and despite some minor improvements you'll still find yourself hitting a number of hurdles and find yourself perched on top of things you wanted to jump over. Away from the climbing issues though, Assassin's Creed: Syndicate introduces a grappling hook, courtesy of inventor Alexander Graham Bell, which makes life in Victorian London a dream. Getting to the top of

buildings happens in a matter of seconds and you can zip across large roads without ever needing to touch the ground, feeling a lot like the Batman Arkham series. It's certainly the finest mechanic to be introduced into the series in a long time and works, from my experience much smoother and easier than the more manual climbing method.

Alexander Graham Bell isn't the only notable historical figure you'll find roaming the streets of London either, you'll stumble across the likes of Dickens, Darwin and Karl Marx, all of whom have their

own side missions available for you. These aren't just ways of stretching out the play time though, the more missions you do the more loyal these associates will become, gifting you with weapons, maps or crafting recipes. The same can be said for the fictional associates, whose missions help you liberate parts of the map. The Ubisoft formula of slowly clearing the fog, or red zones of a map once again returns, and in this instance, it's fair to say Ubisoft have out 'Ubisofted' themselves with this. In each region of London, the Templars have a handful of outposts, bases, child labour factories





and wanted felons that the assassin's want cleared, and all offer a different method of playing. Freeing child workers requires the ultimate stealth approach, catching felons is best when you've cleared a path to walk through, and taking down bases is easily done using the all guns blazing method. All feel different and never stagnate, with the game offering bonuses when you achieve certain objectives, much like the main stories missions.

For these main story missions, it is more of the same amalgamation of tailing Templars, stealing keys and saving prisoners which is disappointing, though this is injected with some life at the

right times. Dramatic train or horse and cart chases give Syndicate a more cinematic experience than usual and jumping from rooftop-to-rooftop at high speeds is a welcome change to the stealth approach feeling like a nice replacement of naval battles. Each sequence has you having to assassinate a member of Starrick's team, and this is when the game feels most refined. There are multiple entrances to buildings, different NPCs to approach and offer help,

and my favourite, the unique assassinations; kills which involve you completing specific objectives and reward you with a cinematic kill, a million miles from the simple hidden blade through the skull. The open nature of the mission means that no two playthroughs will be the same, rewarding players differently for their approach and its a feature that has been a long time coming for the series.

Assassin's Creed: Syndicate is a hugely positive return to the series that last year burnt a lot of fans. While there are still minor textures drops and odd animations as a whole it's an enjoyable experience, but one that doesn't feel like anything new. With the two playable characters, Ubisoft have set the standard for future iterations of the game, and have lots of positives to take into the future. While the story is still forgettable, it doesn't take away from a thoroughly enjoyable Assassin's Creed experience. ■



Assassin's Creed Syndicate



8/10

WRC5 Review

Publisher: Bigben Interactive

Developer: Kylotonn Racing Games

Genre: Racing

Platform: PC, PS4, Xbox One, PS3, Xbox 360, PS Vita



Release Dates

Out Now (Worldwide)

By Steven John Dawson



Let's just jump straight to the elephant in the room, shall we. Kylotonn Games, the developer of WRC 5 FIA World Rally Championship, aren't exactly known for their "big games" roster. Citing such hits as My Body Coach and Speedball 2 it would be remiss to expect a title that's going to knock any of the bigger established names from their respective spots. Codemaster's

DiRT Rally is already making big waves and hasn't finished its Early Access program yet, and Sébastien Loeb Rally EVO has previous WRC series developers Milestone at the head. But Kylotonn isn't just a shot in the dark for the official licensed game, instead, being chosen due to their creative director being ex-SimBin and their game director having worked on the fantastic V-Rally 3 amongst

others. However, that choice doesn't take into account the rest of the development team, who, up until WRC 5 FIA World Rally Championship had the games Truck Racer and Motorcycle Club as their experience for racing games.

Launching the game, you're greeted by the main menu. It's nice and clear at the start, and there's no issues working





out what takes you where, and some friendly voice-overs help guide you through the various options. Looking to the on-line section, and I couldn't help but feel that particular voice-over had been phoned in somewhat, with the narrator's voice pitching up at the end of every sentence as if it were a question, rather than informative of your current selection.

I hopped into a quick race, to get a feel for the game before settling into any of the more demanding races. I picked the slowest class and a track of

100% tarmac so that there was little in the way of variables that could really catch me off-guard. This is where Kylotonn's inexperience with the genre starts to shine through. The first thing I noticed, was that the graphics didn't do much to convince me I was playing this on a current generation console, in fact, it'd be hard pushed to say that it wasn't just the Xbox 360 version ported to the Xbox One. I'm not naive enough to think that the entire road texturing should be different from the start of the stage to the end, but there

should be enough variance that it's not repeated on every one to two foot of road.

The cars handle sufficiently well, erring slightly on the side of feeling too light, or disconnected from the road surface at times. But the real let-down is the feedback (or lack thereof) you get from the car while racing through the narrow country lanes. I had to keep trying different buttons for the handbrake when I got started, as I wasn't sure the one shown in the configuration menu was really

doing anything. There's such little tyre noise in this game, that when using the hand-brake, there was no audible indication of the tyres having locked up. This also extends to cornering as well. Throw a Scandinavian flick as you enter a corner, and even on gravel, there's no audible feedback from the tyres that you're sliding, which makes it more difficult to gauge when to return power to the throttle. Different surfaces don't affect this either, as there was barely any tyre squeal from hard cornering on tarmac and engine sounds all but disappeared when you're not accelerating. It made for some very odd, very quiet moments during the game.

My co-driver did, at times, completely miss corners out

of the pace notes, leading to some very hairy moments when you're hooning down a road; trees bordering your car with about a meter to spare either side. One wrong move in rally and you're as good as wrecked.

There was also some very perceptible frame rate drops too, dropping beneath 30fps on occasion, even in sections where there wasn't much going on. That said, and with previous problems under the belt, there's still a decent feeling of accomplishment getting across the line and beating your competitors.

Before I got too settled with the controller, I thought best to connect the steering wheel and get used to it instead; after all, this is how I intend to play the

game going forward. I hooked the wheel up, got seated in and relaunched WRC 5 FIA World Rally Championship from the Xbox One's dashboard. "Press menu to continue" said WRC 5 FIA World Rally Championship, I pressed, and I pressed, and I then checked I was signed in on the wheel, and I continued to press buttons all over, to see if I could get into the game.

"Surely not" I thought. I quickly launched Forza Motorsport 6 to ensure my wheel hadn't broken at an inconvenient time. I was up and in a race within a few minutes so it wasn't that... back to WRC 5 FIA World Rally Championship... and I still couldn't get past the opening screen. I took to Google to find out if anyone else had a similar problem, and it turns out they did. So much so in fact that it transpired WRC 5 FIA World Rally Championship shipped without steering wheel support on Xbox 360, Xbox One and PS3 platforms. I can understand a title like Need for Speed forgoing steering wheel support as it's much more arcade in nature, but an officially licensed WRC game?

I slogged on through some career races and it was more





of the same, but this time with the ability to repair the car between stages. Truly, at this point, I felt defeated. I no longer wanted to continue with WRC 5 FIA World Rally Championship knowing that I couldn't enjoy it with the wheel. A patch is in the works apparently, but I have a feeling that WRC 5 FIA World Rally Championship will have been relegated to the back of the "games to play" list by the time that update comes round.

Local multiplayer is a hotseat affair, whereby the fastest time wins, so no real particular change from single player, you're just waiting longer

for your turn and online multiplayer is you vs. the ghosts of your lobby mates. A shame, as dealing with the consequences of the driver in front of you on course fluffing it up could have made for some interesting moments.

In all, it feels mediocre throughout - almost as though the release has been rushed in some way, whether that's to

appease license restrictions, shareholders or whatever. If this is the case, it's a shame that Kylotonn's name ends up being tarred with a less-than-stellar release. This could have been their breakaway game; the one that puts them up there with the big boys. As it stands now, it puts them with their bargain bin brothers. ■



WRC5

5/10

Sublevel Zero Review

Publisher: Mastertronic
Developer: Sigtrap Games
Genre: Action
Platform: PC



Release Dates
Out Now (Worldwide)

By Luke Greenfield



After previewing Sublevel Zero, I was more than eager to get my hands on the game upon its release earlier last month. Roguelikes are my thing anyway, and having known about Descent beforehand but never played it, I jumped

at the chance and bought this game as soon as I could.

Sublevel Zero is a modern rendition of Descent, a game released in 1994 that utilises the feature Six Degrees of Freedom, in which there is no gravity controlling the

environment, giving the player complete freedom on where to move and look.

The story behind Sublevel Zero is that, for hundreds of years, the universe has been simply destroying itself for no known reason. The survivors





of these events have been scattered amongst the stars. Clans are formed, with no government to control the remnants of humanity who are left to fend for themselves across the decaying universe.

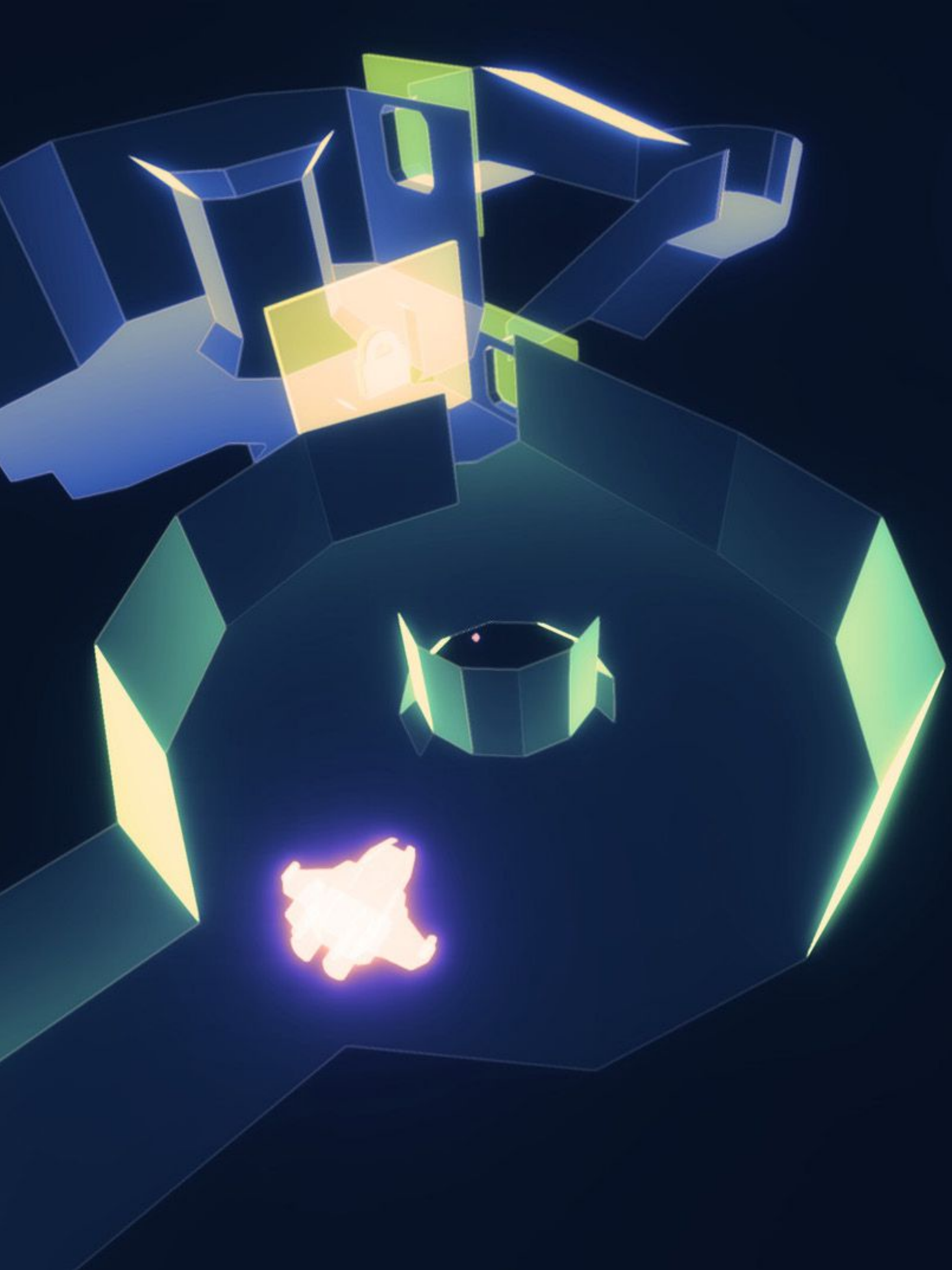
Some of these Clans attempt to seek out the secrets of the universe, including what happened/is happening, and in hopes of somehow reversing the changes that have been made to space itself. As a scout for your clan, you come across a station and an accident occurs, causing both your ship and the station to be sucked into a wormhole and spat out somewhere unknown in the vastness

of space. You are forced to venture in alone, in hopes of finding technology to get back home and maybe discover more about what happened to the galaxy (and every other one while you're at it).

Being a roguelike, death is a given; you're going to die a lot and want to cry because these deaths were because you didn't spot those 20 missiles that were all flying straight at your face. Enemies in Sublevel Zero vary as you get further into the game. The starting levels having simple, slow enemies that don't deal much damage, whereas later levels including more intense opponents, such as enemies

that dash for you, dealing high damage should their paths collide with yours, or fast firing and very rapid opponents that prove to be a lot more difficult to hit than it sounds.

Weaponry and inventory is important in Sublevel Zero. There are three types of primary weapons: bullet, plasma and energy. They all function the same, however with perks and crafting you can combine these weapons to give yourself a much more powerful arsenal. Throughout playthroughs, you can earn perks, called Nanocarts, such as giving you a small increase to your accuracy at the cost of fire-rate, or greatly increasing damage with one





type of weaponry at the cost of the others, really throwing in the choice of which weapons and perks you should use.

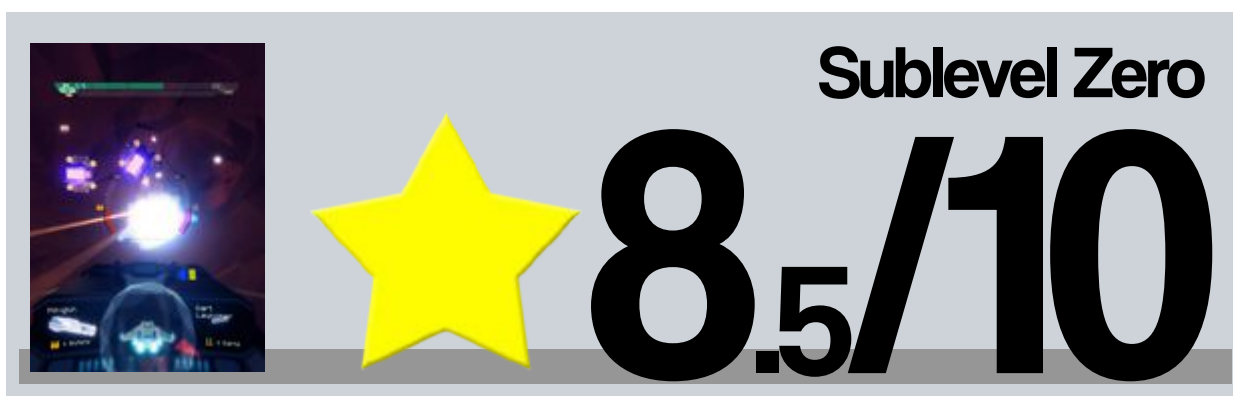
The gameplay is procedurally generated, meaning that every time you play, you will be met with a different layout of the station, with different loot and enemies in different places. This means that dying and starting again does not yield the same result, and gives the game decent replayability even if you complete it. Audio logs are scattered across the levels and give a good insight to the station and even more reason to replay the game in search of them.

At the end of each level is a boss-type scenario that gets progressively harder as you progress through the game. At first it is simply a Sphere surrounded by low-level enemies, but the second level it begins to spew lasers out as you attack it, and these become more and more powerful the later in the game you are. This sudden surprise and crank-up in difficulty is sure to catch players off guard,

and is what was responsible for many of my deaths in my time with the game.

The art style of Sublevel Zero is effective, being the right blend of retro goodness and perfectly blended textures to create an aesthetically pleasing experience that doesn't try too hard to look perfect, but still manages to pull it off. The soundtrack follows the route, being a funky, upbeat 8-bit tune that never ceases to please my ears, it adds to the replayability, just to hear the soundtrack is enough reason to give the game one more try.

Overall, Sublevel Zero seems like a brilliant game, whether you're a fan of roguelikes or not. The art style coupled with the music and the sheer amount of replayability in this game means it is well worth the price it is given, and will be one you'll find yourself playing very frequently in order to just get a bit further than you did last time. ■



Tales of Zestiria Review

Publisher: Bandai Namco

Developer: Bandai Namco

Genre: RPG

Platform: PC, PS4, PS3



Release Dates

Out Now (Worldwide)

By Andrew Duncan



The Tales series finally reaches new-gen with Tales of Zestiria, bringing with it the flavour you know with characters you don't. As is the wont of JRPG developers, there is a brand new cast of characters to meet, and an all-new quest to take them on. I'll spoil one thing right off

-- if you like to collect every achievement, then prepare for well over 100 hours of gaming: you get a Trophy for completing the game a fourth, fifth and sixth time!

Viewed from the third person, the graphics are very bright and colourful. However, it

doesn't match up with the tone of the game in some sections, as you wind up fighting every fantasy creature available -- werewolves, giant spiders, zombies -- and see cutscenes of an active battlefield, not to mention a guy literally shooting himself in the head on camera...





The sound design is great, with a fantastic opening theme, good voice acting and very fitting incidental music, some of which (the Fire Trial comes to mind), I really enjoyed. However -- it's very loud. I usually have my TV at volume 15, but have to keep it on 6 at most, to avoid deafening the household. On my other TV I have it at 11 - if it's above 3 I'm uncomfortable. And for whatever reason, the music isn't licensed, meaning the PS4 is unable to stream, record footage or take screenshots (even when getting a Trophy)...

You meet Sorey, the star of the show, as he and his friend Mikleo are searching the ruins just outside their village. They discover an unconscious girl, and that's where things take a turn for the strange. She's a human, just like Sorey is, but the village is a Seraphim village -- and only humans with the gift can see Seraphs. So as far as she can see, Sorey has lived alone for his entire life, and yet she doesn't run away at the first chance she gets...

She explains the main plot line before returning to the capital city Lady Lake -- despite it being the capital of Hyland, she is

surprised that Sorey knows of it. That's like someone from London being surprised that someone in Slough has heard of it... But: anime dialogue. Like when Sorey says "Who knew these ruins were underground too?" -- everyone, Sorey. Everyone knew. That's what ruins do, and you literally keep on about having read the Celestial Record, which explains most of the ruins in the world.

The country has gone to pot, basically. People are in unrest, there is disease and war is on the horizon -- it's up to the chosen one, as stated by the

narrator: "In times of calamity, people pray for a Shepherd...". The Shepherd being someone with powers who can save the people from themselves.

The Seraphim cannot be seen by humans, but if you pray to them they will give their blessing. The one human who can talk to them is sent out into the world, and through little fault of his own, is drawn into the role of Shepherd. He gathers a bunch of followers and gets magical powers which look like miracles to those who cannot see Seraph. He is feared by some, and those in power try to

use his existence to further their agendas. If this wasn't heavily influenced by Christianity and their Jesus 'shepherd of men' Christ, I'll eat a snack.

It takes about ten hours to get your full compliment of powers, and learn how to use all of your special moves. However, combat can be as easy or difficult as you want, as it can be set to auto, semi-auto or manual control. I kept mine at semi-auto for the most part, as that lets you just mash buttons -- which is the best option for me. Your mileage may vary, of course, and if you really





enjoyed the fighting system in Final Fantasy XIII, then you will want to put it on auto and see fights as cutscenes.

As you progress, you gain the Armatization ability, letting Sorey merge with one of the Seraph's that you join up with. It's certainly easier than the Dragon Ball Z Fusion Dance, with just a button press to instantly change. This joins both characters' health bars, as well as giving you a new set of element-based abilities -- but comes with the risk of only having one health bar: only

one person for the Hellions to attack. You also get a cool outfit and, usually, longer hair -- again, yes, like that one thing in Dragon Ball Z... It uses up your Burst Gauge, so you can't just spam it in every battle -- but it's not difficult to refill your burst gauge if you really do want to use it in every battle.

Hellions are the enemies, formed out of the ether by the malevolence of people in the area. The stronger that is, the stronger the Hellions. Humans, animals, Seraphim and plants can all become

Hellions, giving a huge array of enemy types to battle. I mentioned werewolves and zombies before, but there are flowers, octopi, dogs, soldiers, harpies, scorpions... Not even including recolours ("stronger versions"), I'm certain there are more enemies in this than there were in the last couple of RPG's I played, put together.

With the amount of enemies and their different types, it can make it hard to build a good all-around squad, with only two humans and two Seraphs able to battle at once. No

matter your attack, there is an enemy that is resistant to that type of damage -- elemental, physical, Artes (special moves)... You can switch Seraph on the fly, so if something isn't working you have options.

Each area of the game is either big or huge, and there are plenty of them. The problem is, that they feel pretty empty a lot of the time, and some feel artificially bigger thanks to various things blocking your way. These make the game very linear, which helps when you have no idea where you should be heading, which happens often. Your objective has a star on the map and minimap, but that doesn't do you any good when it's in another area. If

you're in Lady Lake and your objective requires you to leave the city, head across the field and into another area (three area transitions), then you had best hope you know where they want you to go. If you hold R1 it tells you in a sentence what you should be doing, just not where that is.

I mentioned that the writing is a little dire at times, and a lot of that can be blamed on the translation. It all makes sense and is in pure English, but rather than re-write some of the lines to be more natural, they seem to be straight translations, meaning some of the jokes don't land properly. And this, coming from someone who watched (and adored) 52 episodes of a

fan-subbed anime that dealt purely in Japanese-flavoured jokes. It's not all bad, and I've laughed loudly at several of the skits and cutscenes, but it can sometimes lack panache.

The other problem is that the story is very generic. Hero rises from nothing, love of his newfound friends makes him stronger, save the world from devastation, protect all peoples within all nations, Jesse, James... Sorry, that's Team Rocket... One of the characters, Lailah, is very secretive about her past, to the point that she changes the subject or pretends not to hear questions about it. She also gives a very specious reason to travel the world - "I want you to find





out these things for yourself” - you’d have to not realise that ruins go underground, to not think she was hiding something that would become relevant in the third act.

That said, it’s a very enjoyable game. The character interactions are where it shines, and it shines brightly. At save points, when staying at inns, upon finding Discovery’s (landmarks, or things of note), it kicks into a skit which

lasts one-to-four minutes, and sees the characters discussing this and that. Some of the cutscenes are, as I said, hilarious such -- as when the Seraphim are puppeting Sorey’s body to make people think he’s uncoordinated.

With a raft of customisation options and more fun than uncomfortable moments, JRPG fans will get a lot out of this game. And if you’re willing to put in the time and effort, your Trophy/Achievement boxes will soon be full. ■



Tales of Zestiria
7.5/10

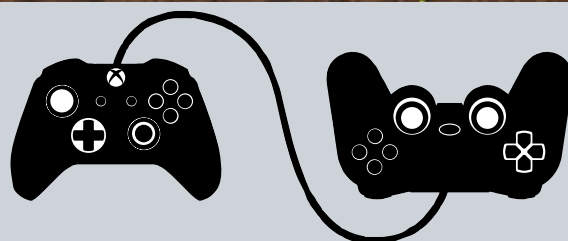
Kingdom Review

Publisher: Raw Fury

Developer: Noio, Licorice

Genre: Strategy

Platform: PC



Release Dates

Out Now (Worldwide)

By VodKaVK



It's safe to say that Kingdom doesn't play safe. With its simple-looking models and environment, one may assume that this is a game that fully relies on the difficulty and originality of its mechanics to appeal the player. Indeed, as any in the long list of challenging roguelikes, Kingdom's experience is fuelled by self-improvement, full knowledge of the game's

design and in lesser measure, luck. Demanding gameplay is a trope in roguelikes, but Kingdom lacks variety in strategies, an appealing deep lore, or an experience personally tailored to each player, making it not fully able to compete with its inspirations.

With no name, House, or story, you play as the lonely king (or queen) of your own isolated

DIY kingdom, whose goal is to bring peace to the home of the crown. However, you are not quarrelling with the lords of bordering territories; you have to fend off waves of monsters as you expand your domains indefinitely, and recruit valiant vassals willing to give their life for their mute queen. There's ultimately an endgame, and a very strict recipe to attain it. These monsters, spamming





into your world through evil magic portals, are after you; and more specifically, your crown. So just like in real life, your aim is to keep it to yourself and don't let anybody take it.

The innovating economy of this game is the big star of the show. Unlike most monarchs nowadays, ours knows that delegation is unreliable, and that one has to do everything himself. So with a pouch of coins tied to your belt, you must travel across the land in search of small settlements of wayward, king-less people, and toss a coin at their feet. This will prompt them to dress up in decent clothing and make

their way to your castle, where you can pay to treat them with bows, hammers or scythes. With these coins, you'll also have to build walls, farms and outposts, upgrade your castle and present your reverence to the gods of bricolage and hunting, which give your units stat boosts for some time.

This simple but clever use of a singular resource, with low-cost units and low profit, makes its management very straightforward, and the decisions that you will have to make can be the key to surviving one night more in the early stages of your gameplay, where hunting is the best way

to earn the sweet hard cash. Once your kingdom is spread enough, your belt pouch will not be big enough to carry all those coins, so much of it is lost on the way. This big contrast between the tight-budget early days and the overflowing later ones is perhaps something that reflects the need for ways to spend money on in the later game. Coins are also a great way to cull the enemies' attack, since they'll most likely grab a coin and turn on their toes, leaving you alone for the night.

When the night falls, and waves of deformed monsters attack your walls, they will do so in order to steal your units'

possessions, your coins and, ultimately, your crown. Every five nights, you'll encounter a red moon night, where enemies come in larger numbers.

And you'd better be ready.

By nightfall, you should have your outer walls as fortified as possible, with tons of archers at each side. Upgrading your bonfire will make stone walls or improved outposts available, which is crucial if you want to last further in the game.

Farms will also allow for your vassals to produce coins more efficiently, albeit they take very large areas and they're quickly overrun by monsters.

The issue here, is that the linearity of the map, extending to the right and left in a very

unidimensional way, thwarts many aspects of the game.

First of all, exploration in this game is not particularly deep, as reaching the end of the level in each side can be done in a day. Secondly, there's no way to circumvent enemies while exploring other than tossing a coin at them and hoping they just take it and run away. If you find an enemy, your only resource is turn back the way you came and hope for your horse to not run out of stamina.

Your horse can only sprint for a limited amount of time, which means that travelling across the level back to your castle is clunky and tedious. You'll have to stop every now and then to let your horse recover,

and at some points it ends up being annoyingly unnecessary. Moreover, the pace of the game is sometimes too fast compared to the horse's continuous stops and slow galloping speed, which may end up being a bit obnoxious and contradictory. The lack of depth in terms of level design is very much reflected in the gameplay, being dull and repetitive. As there's so little variety in gameplay — which doesn't mean that it isn't deep itself —, the result are vast distances to travel that are same thing over and over.

This repetition allows for a very particular formula to follow, a recipe that once you understand the mechanics and elements of the game,





becomes easy to figure out. A quick look to the community guides will show how intuitive and easy-to-grasp this game is. It lacks the difficulty and need for specialisation that games like *A Curious Expedition* or *FTL* have. Once you get the hang of it, it's a game of tic-tac-toe, in spite of the eight hours before that happens, which will keep you gripped until the very end. However, after controlling a few monarchs, each with different colours and emblems, you've seen everything there's to see.

The art style is something that I find quite functional. The handling of light around the fires and the day/night cycle is something to point out, but other than that, all models, whereas they perfectly cohere altogether, I can't help feeling

that the colour palette is much more effective than the models themselves, which feel as basic as possible. This, with a very aleatory soundtrack with very different beats that come up in seemingly random moments, makes up for an experience that while functional, doesn't impress as much as some other roguelikes.

All in all, the mechanics of the game are a very clever twist to the build-your-base systems. The economy is also a very smart simplification of resource-management, and

it overall coheres into this tight and enclosed experience that feels challenging, with some disappointing aspects nevertheless. In these roguelikes, there's a compulsory requirement for variety and replayability, and *Kingdom* fails to deliver in this regard. *Kingdom* won't last long in your hard drive given the great array of much richer experiences out in the roguelike Steam catalogue, but the interesting gameplay concepts that it brings to the table makes it a remarkable exploration of roguelike mechanics. ■



Kingdom

7/10

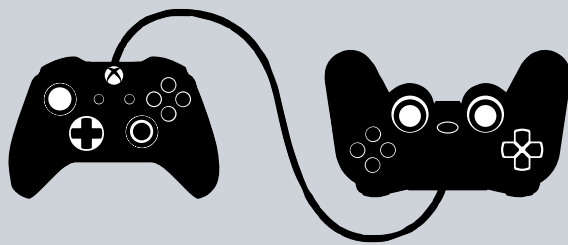
SOMA Review

Publisher: Frictional Games

Developer: Frictional Games

Genre: Action-Adventure

Platform: PC, PS4



Release Dates

Out Now (Worldwide)

By VodKaVK



A monster-breeding underwater city sounds like a trope a bit too familiar to all first-person enthusiasts. Nevertheless, whereas Rapture's story was imbued with political denotations, SOMA's Pathos-II begs questions about what's

a life worth living and what makes us humans. It frames them in a gloomy and grievous context, where our answers are somehow determined. Pathos-II starts off as a geothermal power plant, but ends up being the last human inhabited shelter in the world. And shortly after,

we — Simon — turn up in this H.R. Giger-esque nightmare, not knowing how or why.

This premise goes beyond the overly-typical protagonist's 'blank slate', but rather is used as a tool to explore these questions about our own





human nature; pushing them to the confines of Philip K. Dick's human/robot dichotomy. As much as this theme follows the main character's story throughout, it is inevitable to find some aspects simplistic and predictable — such as the very ending segment, which is thoroughly foreshadowed. It evokes unsettledness by using solitude and our individual humanity as a pivot point, and it contrasts it the end goal of the game, which in turn, is socially prosperous.

Is life worth living? Well, life's not as inviting if we share a

bed with a murdering monster portending our demise. If SOMA had framed these questions within a more social and optimistic tone, rather than our own individuality, maybe the answers would have elicited much more personal responses, prompting us to consider the pros and cons of what SOMA brings to the table. The Last of Us's ending would have not brought about as many tears without the galvanising endearment towards Ellie. This setting, however, is cleverly used to narrow and sculpt your thoughts on your duty within Pathos-II.

But in Pathos-II, we're alone, for the most part. We have lost everything that was dear to us, and in spite of it, we venture into the depths with nothing but our poor ability to circumvent monsters. The comparison with *Amnesia: The Dark Descent* is unavoidable, and perhaps something that doesn't necessarily leave SOMA in a better position. *Amnesia* uses horror to evoke that lingering paranoia, reaching to primal triggers, leaving us fearing what's around every corner. Conversely, SOMA focuses on asking questions that are deeply personal and barely answerable,



transforming its creatures and its horror as a mean to do so.

However, the enemy and level design is odd and lacklustre. Corridor loops and dark and labyrinthine rooms forewarn about enemy presence, which is itself made obvious by the fact that when we look in their direction, they are alerted, our life depletes and our vision gets distorted. Some sounds, like our footsteps, alert them of our presence, but tripping over an oil can and kicking it halfway across the room doesn't. What at first seemed like a teleporting pattern resulted in a glitchy spawn system, and their spotting range is unclear and independent of lighting.

There isn't the gradual and methodical progression anymore, as there used to be in *Amnesia*. Level design forces us to either brute-force our way to the end, by trying to outrun the enemy while withstanding its attacks; or curling up in a corner of the room, as there is almost no place to hide in the whole of Pathos-II's facility. Being in plain sight, staring at the wall while the enemy roams around, results in a very absurd and frustrating mechanic,



as at that point there's very little we can do to avoid being detected. These awkward situations are laughable and when they happen — very often, I should say —, they break the tension bubble making enemies so fearsome.

Pathos-II is full of details and objects that tell stories and we can interact with. It may not be the best setting to hide around and avoid hellish creatures, but it provides a rich atmosphere, being as cold and perturbing as it is realistic and enthralling. Even though the level design gives enemies and objectives away, it also contrasts the danger areas with the safe

ones, making every safe haven comforting and rewarding, as we learn about the facility through the conversations with Catherine, our sporadic companion throughout the game. These talks between Simon and Catherine are what drives Simon into the ocean abyss and where most of the emotional weight is placed.

The recordings and emails found in computers — with an oddly basic and curbed interface — also convey the hope and angst that the crew inside Pathos-II experienced. Although not strictly necessary to understand and follow the plot, it gives great insight regarding

the crew's motivations and relations with each other, making the story profoundly humane in spite of the great array of conscience-less robots roaming around the labs.

The ambiguity of the morality included in the decisions that we make settle any pre-existing thoughts that we could have regarding the theme prevalent in the game. The dark and cruel comedic undertone touted in the first third of the game gradually vanishes to allow for a paradoxical and depressive series of events – with references to authors such as Poul Anderson —, forcing the player to deal with

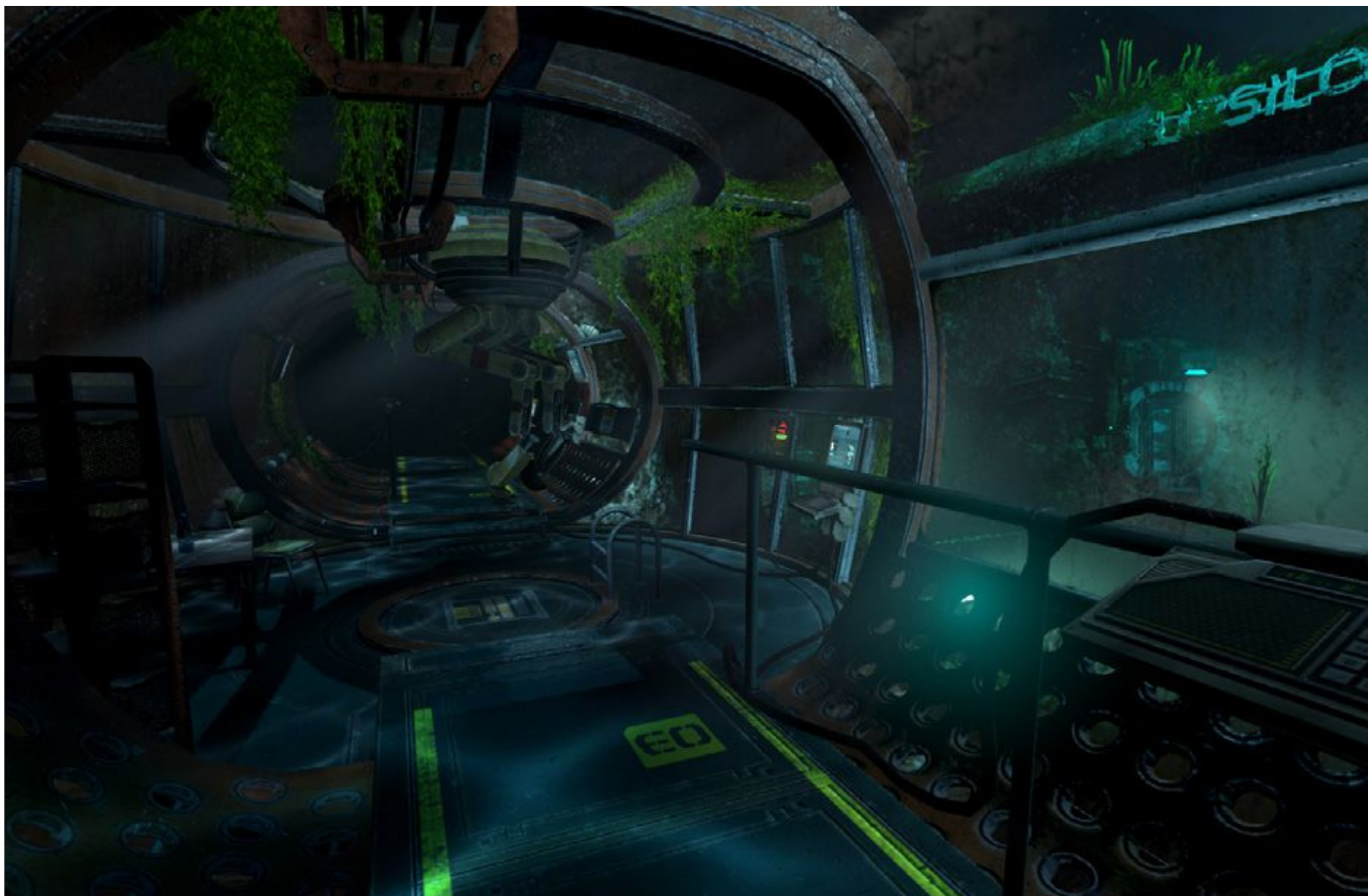
the consequences of brutal actions, because they were more merciful and beneficial in the long run. The game uses these events to clarify the plot and the game's intentions, and they will haunt you well after they happen.

Alongside the decisions we've made, the creaking of the pipes, the overwhelming silence of the bottom of the ocean and the constant flickering of panel lights give Pathos-II an ability to immerse the player that Amnesia didn't have. The chromatic aberration that filters your vision for most of the game

can be obnoxious at points, but it flows along the idea of coexistence with robots. It all converges into a visual feast of black gurgling goo covering walls, corpses and machines. The facility might be under clear takeover by this 'structure gel', but that doesn't stop it from being suggestive and dazzling to look at, accompanied by a cast of evocative sound effects that spur the player to keep moving, and always be on their toes. Likewise, the emotional connection with the characters wouldn't have been possible without such a coactive and expressive voice-over.

Nevertheless, SOMA's best asset in comparison to Amnesia is its pacing. SOMA's puzzles haven't been made easier, but its design is generally much more enclosed within the area you're in. It might take you a bit to figure out how to solve it, but all the clues are right in front of you. With a revisit to the approach to puzzles, the inventory-management and sanity system has been dropped. This generally makes the progression more dynamic, and helps the player focus on the story and the action. The number of objects now laying around the rooms is





much larger, the environments much richer and the lighting wavers due to the different light colours. Perhaps the exclusion of item pick-ups was a result of decluttering the environment; perhaps Pathos-II's atmosphere didn't work with the sanity system; in any case, there is a lack of tension due to it, albeit compensated with a more story-focused and enterprising narrative.

SOMA feels like a step down from Amnesia: The Dark Descent in some regards. The technical performance

excels at all time, but its level design and mechanics have been slightly thwarted. Its thought-provoking well-paced plot, sound and visual design work much better, but some limitations in gameplay make it not fully live up to its legacy. The cathartic up-pace of the final segment is a clear example of how action-focused this game is

in comparison, and it executes its emotional ride brilliantly, albeit of its pretentious but overly simplistic and predictable intentions. If the monsters had been half as well-designed as the overarching plot, this game would have fixed a great deal of its issues. ■



SOMA
8.5/10

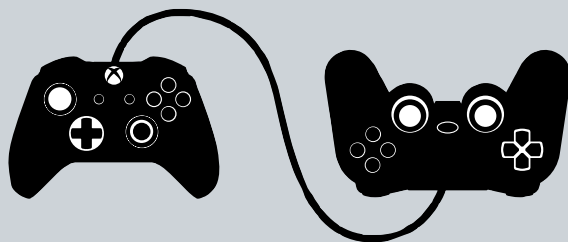
Star Wars: Battlefront Review

Publisher: Electronic Arts

Developer: DICE

Genre: Action

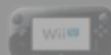
Platform: PC, PS4, Xbox One



Release Dates

Out Now (Worldwide)

By Calum Parry



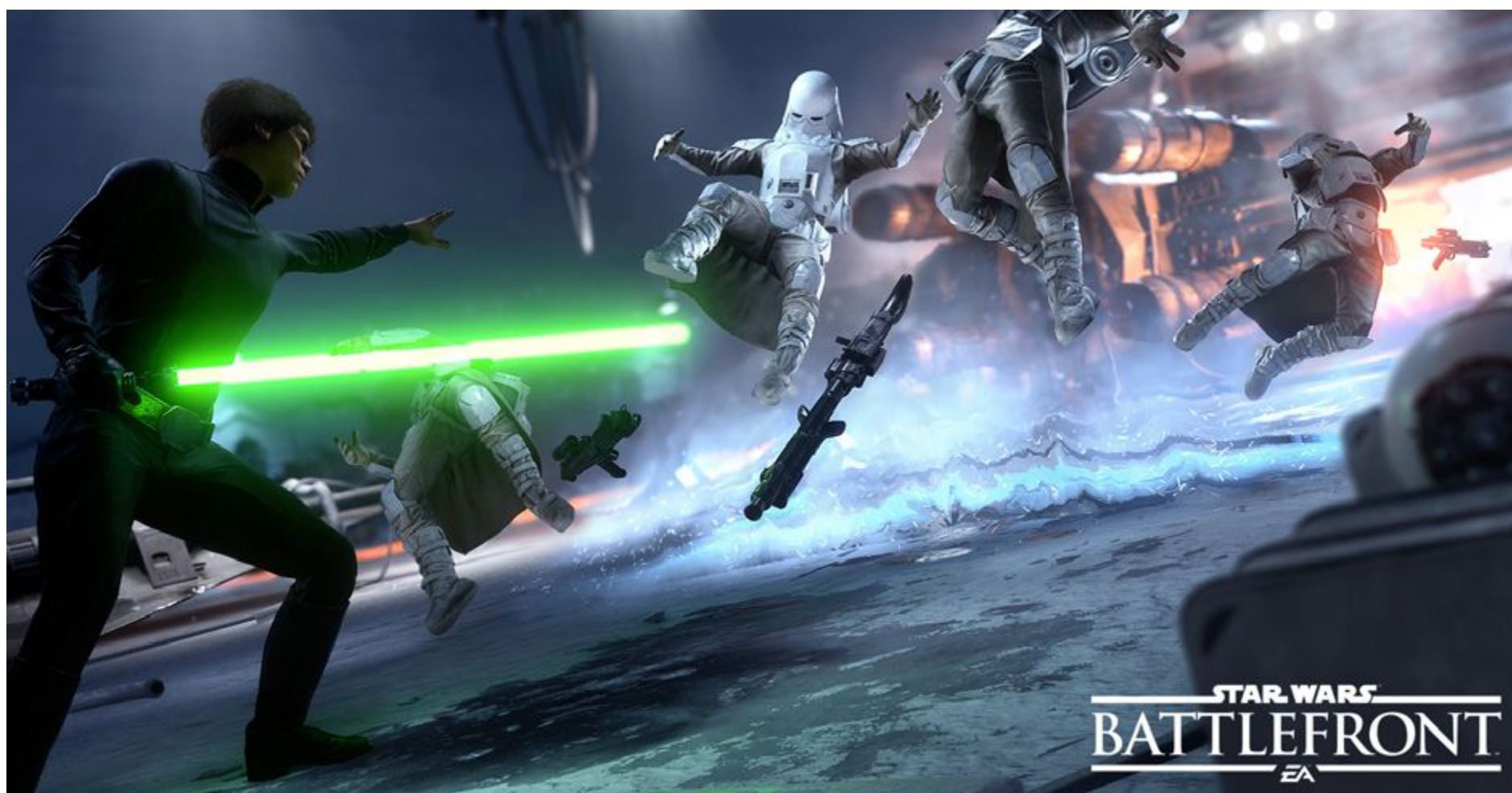
This year there is no better time to be a Star Wars fan. With the arrival of the seventh installment in the movie franchise and alongside the absurd amount of toys we have new videogames on their way. It's only just the beginning as we step onto the battlefield in the boots of a Rebel or Imperial fighting in

a galaxy far far away. It's the return of Star Wars: Battlefront.

Developed by the legendary DICE, the team behind the "levelution" that is the Battlefield series, it was clear since its reveal there was no signs of stopping the hype train on its full speed course to greatness. What could

go wrong? As the force was certainly strong there was no chance of it taking a turn to the dark side, or could it?

Battlefront isn't a new franchise, but it is clear that EA is treating it as a new IP. Originally released a long time ago for the 6th generation of consoles, Star Wars: Battlefront, its sequel





and spin offs saw players fight a galactic war, taking part in wide scale battles either within the prequel or sequel universes. Now though, with the future of Star Wars in the hands of Disney all attention is on the original trilogy and its future sequels. That means no prequel nonsense, no battle droids and especially no Jar Jar. Battlefront is a love letter to all things original and this by far shines throughout. It's just a shame that beyond this there are some cracks that begin to appear.

Being an entirely multiplayer focused title, don't expect to see

any flashy cinematic campaign. DICE aren't exactly well known for their diverse and interesting stories, but what they do best is create an experience that is your own. They want you to have a slice of Star Wars, letting you create your own stories within, and without a doubt, this is the closest experience you'll get to date. You'll almost feel part of the universe.

In my first experience, I was able to step into the shoes of a Rebel soldier upon the planet Hoth, defending against the oncoming onslaught of Imperial AT-AT's destined to destroy the

Rebel base. However, unlike the iconic battle in The Empire Strikes Back, which saw the destruction of the Rebel base, I had the opportunity to fight in full force alongside my comrades and stop them. It was the Walker Assault, featuring 40 players, combat on ground, in the air and if fighting for the empire; controllable AT-AT's and AT-ST's. As a Rebel I was tasked to get the uplink stations on in order to call Y-Wings to disable the oncoming AT-AT's, the empire's mission to stop and in movie fashion destroy the Rebel base. Seeing the blaster fire rage across the

snow swept landscape and the roaring sounds of Tie Fighters and X-Wings above gave an exhilarating experience, which can only be left diminished if players don't coordinate, but that can be the same for all multiplayer titles.

Walker Assault is certainly the most popular mode, it shows off Battlefront's true colours and with immense scale at hand it's a shame that the capacity for 40 players is only limited to two modes. The aforementioned and Supremacy - a twist on

Battlefield's conquest mode, where players fight to control five points on the map. Both are the heart of Battlefront's multiplayer experience, but that's not to say there aren't other modes to enjoy, especially for those who may not be a fan of large-scale battles, but rather prefer to take on the power of the force, fight in infantry focused combat or straight up just want to take to the skies.

With nine available modes, there is plenty of variety and all available across four different

planets: Hoth, Endor, Sullust and Tatooine. You've got your straight up team deathmatch in Blast, a stylish version of capture the flag in Cargo and a pod collecting version of king of the hill in Drop Zone. While none of these modes are exactly original, they have their own unique Star Wars take on them and even with less players they're still great fun.

The mode which I found the most enjoyable was Droid Run. It was the one that I kept coming back to the most, as



they were certainly the droids I was looking for. In the 6 versus 6 mode, your team must capture and hold little traveling droids (who don't seem entirely fazed by all the commotion around and will happily plod along across the map) capture all three and win you the game. With less players It meant tight close quarters combat adding a sense of urgency that requires you to work as a team.

Of course, it's not all about stepping into the shoes of a stormtrooper or a member of the Rebel alliance, heroes join the battle as well with the power of lightside or the darkside at their side. Within Walker Assault and Supremacy, if found, players can grab a hero pick up allowing them to pick among three iconic heroes. For the alliance you can mark the return of the Jedi as Luke, shoot first as Han Solo or lead the Rebellion as Leia. As for the empire, strike back as Darth Vader, collect some bounties as Boba Fett or have unlimited power as The Emperor.

Playing as a hero is overkill and trying find one of the pickups before another teammate is almost a game in itself. As a







hero you'll have free reign to use their powers, only limited by a cool-down, their health is also much higher making them playable bosses. There is nothing more exciting than grabbing a pickup and play as your favourite hero decimating the opposition, with the only downfall being it can be short lived, depending on well you utilise their powers. Fortunately if you want more opportunity to play them you can try out Hero Hunt and Heroes vs. Villains. In these you can take up the role of a hero and defend yourself against seven opposing players, or work as a team either as a soldier or hero and defeat the opposition.

The last mode is one that I didn't play much of, simply because I'm a terrible pilot. Fighter Squadron lets you take to the skies and fight in an all out dogfight with up to 20 players. You can take control of X-wings, A-wings, Tie Fighters and Interceptors. If you're lucky you can even attempt to take down the enemies in less than 12 parsecs in the Millennium Falcon or continue the hunt in Boba Fett's Slave 1. Fighter Squadron is more or less team deathmatch, but does have added bonuses towards winning, such as defending your own transport ships while destroying the enemies. With the lack of space battles, this mode by

far feels the least authentic as it just yearns to be up above and to galaxies far far away.

For those who like to play something that resembles a single player or co-operative experience, then you're in luck. There are short tutorial missions that play like scenes from the movies teaching you the basics and challenge modes that you can play alongside and against bots. The co-op mode lets you partner up and survive against waves of incoming enemies becoming increasingly more difficult the longer you survive. They're a nice addition, but in no way is it a recommendation for purchase alone.



Battlefront isn't a mere Battlefield reskin, saying that would be an understatement. DICE designed the game with casual players in mind and while it isn't a bad thing, it does leave the game with a huge lack of depth. After all it is for all the Star Wars fans so accessibility was priority and this is where it falls into disappointment. Movement and combat plays very much the same as any other shooter. There isn't anything complicated here; you run, shoot and use the equipment etc. Vehicles and certain weapons such as the rocket launcher or portable

turret are limited to pick ups found throughout the maps in the same way as the heroes.

The only thing which sets it apart from other shooters is the choice to play either in first person or third person. Though, this neither provides an advantage or disadvantage being entirely personal choice, I myself preferred third person, but at times some scenarios felt better suited in first as you can switch on the fly. Players can be pick between wide variety of weapons from blasters to pistols, each having a cooldown rather than ammo,

they overheat putting them out of use for a short period of time, but fortunately you can cut the cooldown with an active reload similarly to Gears of War.

Throwables and boosters are in the form of cards, these can be customised and can range from thermal detonators to the use of a jetpack. Don't get me wrong, there are plenty of unlocks available as well as some basic character customisation too, which can be unlocked from ranking up and purchasing using in game credits. However, the system itself isn't very engaging to warrant much

attention as the game can so easily be picked up and played, I found myself just sticking with the standard loadout, but at times having the right hand can make a difference.

Now, without a doubt Star Wars: Battlefront is a visually stunning game and is its high point, you could happily stand stare in awe and bask in it all. DICE have done an outstanding job capturing the cinematic look and feel of the movies, whether you're speeding through the forests of Endor seeing Ewoks above in the treetops or Jawas scamper into hiding on the plains of Tatooine, the cinematic attention to detail is throughout and with everything else being so polished as well, you can clearly tell that their time at the Lucasfilm's vault was time well spent. With a crystal clear audio mix, the sound design is also astounding whether it be from blaster fire, the swing of a lightsaber or the explosive awe of an implosion grenade. If you have the option, this deserves to be played with a surround sound system on full.

Unfortunately, while the gameplay is fun and the visuals are gorgeous there isn't much

longevity to be had here. The lack of depth isn't the main problem it's the repetitiveness of it all. With there only being four planets, the largest of playing field being found on Walker Assault and Supremacy all the other modes are locked to smaller sections of those landscapes and after sometime they become too familiar, even after dozen or so hours I found myself getting bored because of this. It was clear from the beginning that things are held back for the season pass, which is a worry, as EA know people will blindly purchase without question because they want more, a true temptation of the dark side and it only further removes value from the base

game. I can not recommend it as a title at full purchase because of this even with the additional free Battle of Jakku map arriving early December.

Personally If this was any other shooter it'll be ridiculed, but this is Star Wars and it's clear that the love for the franchise is far greater than its faults and it makes it very difficult for fans to ignore. If you want an experience that offers the closest you'll get to be being part of the original movie trilogy then this is it, but If you're looking for something more in-depth and offers longevity similar to Battlefield then your looking in the alderaan places. ■



Star Wars: Battlefront

7/10

Invisible Inc. Contingency Plan DLC Review

Publisher: Klei Entertainment
Developer: Klei Entertainment
Genre: Action
Platform: PC



Release Dates
Out Now (Worldwide)

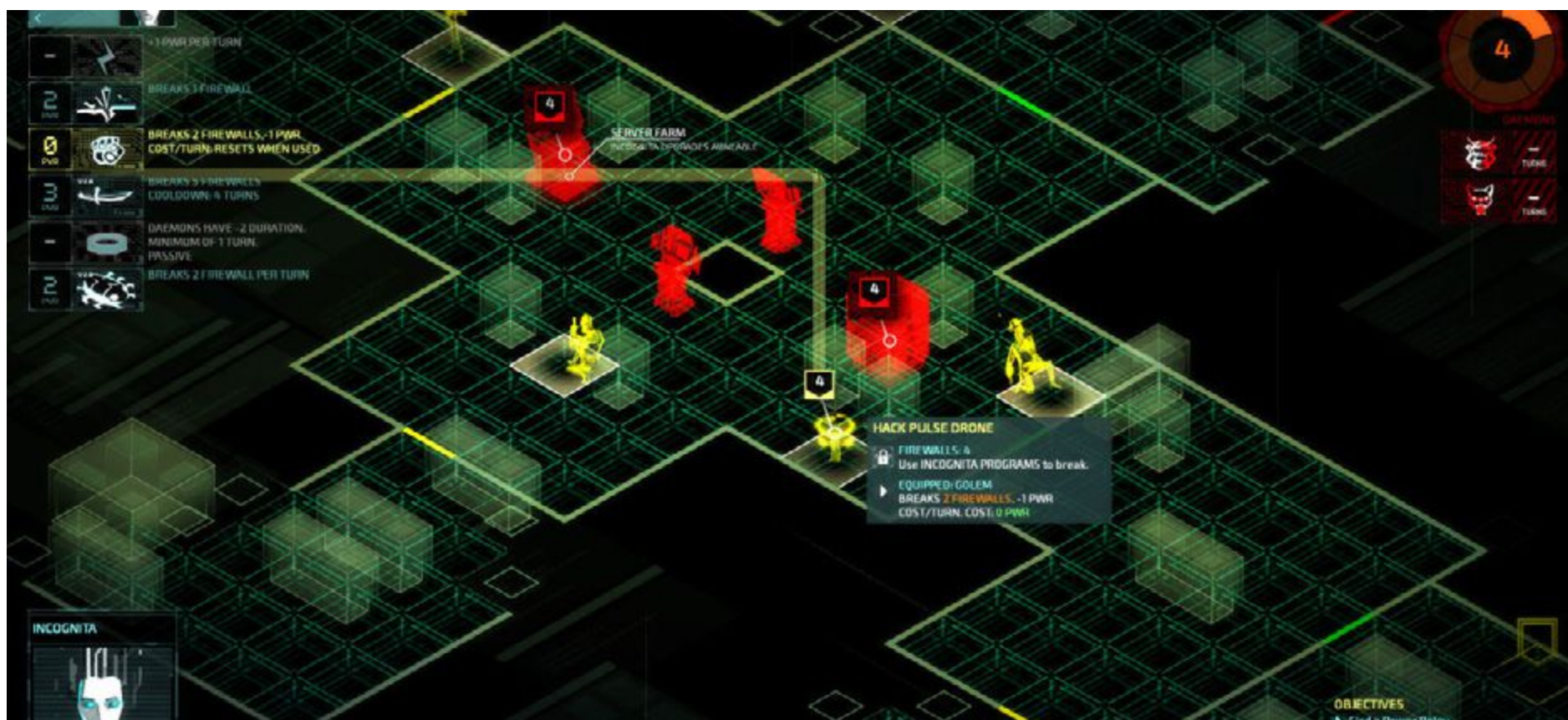
By VodKaVK



A few months ago, Klei Entertainment released Invisible Inc., the result of combining mind-boggling XCOM-like turn-based mechanics, and the jittery feeling of sneaking past guards of Mark of the Ninja. I played it, I reviewed it, and I loved it — albeit its disengaging characters and lack of sense of progression. It juggles with the discrepancy

between the need to invest in your characters throughout the campaign, and the futility of such investment, as they can die at any moment and force you restart the campaign from zero. No moves can be undone within a turn, and repeating a turn comes at a high cost. This is why the game is better relished in low difficulties, where one wrong move in the later levels doesn't entail the loss of many

hours of progress. It isn't only a game where the mechanics were the focus, but also its story, which meant that its roguelike design may not be the friendliest approach — as a side note, maybe a look at Zombi's attitude towards permadeath would be appropriate here, which merges the orthodox approach to narrative with concepts seen in roguelikes.





But the past is the past, and now Klei intends to pump some life into their game, and they're doing so by turning everything up to eleven. Contingency Plan brings about more agents, more enemies, more gadgets, weapons, alarm levels, longer campaign, side missions... It is difficult to not see this as a desperate strife to enhance the game's lifespan, and one that doesn't succeed in all aspects. This move comes from the same developers that just announced their second expansion for Don't Starve; one that, much like the first one did, is expected

to give new twists and turns to the game's universe and mechanics. Not only that, but they went through the hassle of forging a multiplayer version of that game, dubbed Don't Starve Together.

We can recognise that their reputation precedes them, and unfortunately, Contingency Plan doesn't meet the expectations. Unquestionably, a game based around gathering and crafting like Don't Starve can be more versatile when it comes to creating new content, but this doesn't hold up as an

excuse for such a categorically shallow DLC. Let me be clear about this: the new content lets me have my druthers in the same way I can add both Oreo and Kit Kat to my XL fro-yo for 50p more. It is not a caramel-flavoured yogurt, or a new set of Japanese sweets to add; it's the 'same-o, same-o' we had before, over-cluttered with choices that become more and more pointless the more you take them in.

One aspect I discussed in my review is the strange mix between permadeath and a

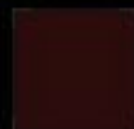
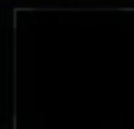


OLIVIA

AUGMENTS

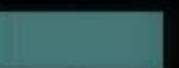
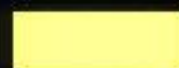


ITEMS (CLICK)

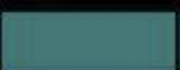
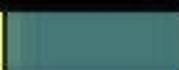


UPGRADE SKILLS

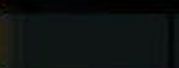
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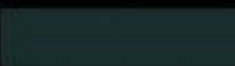
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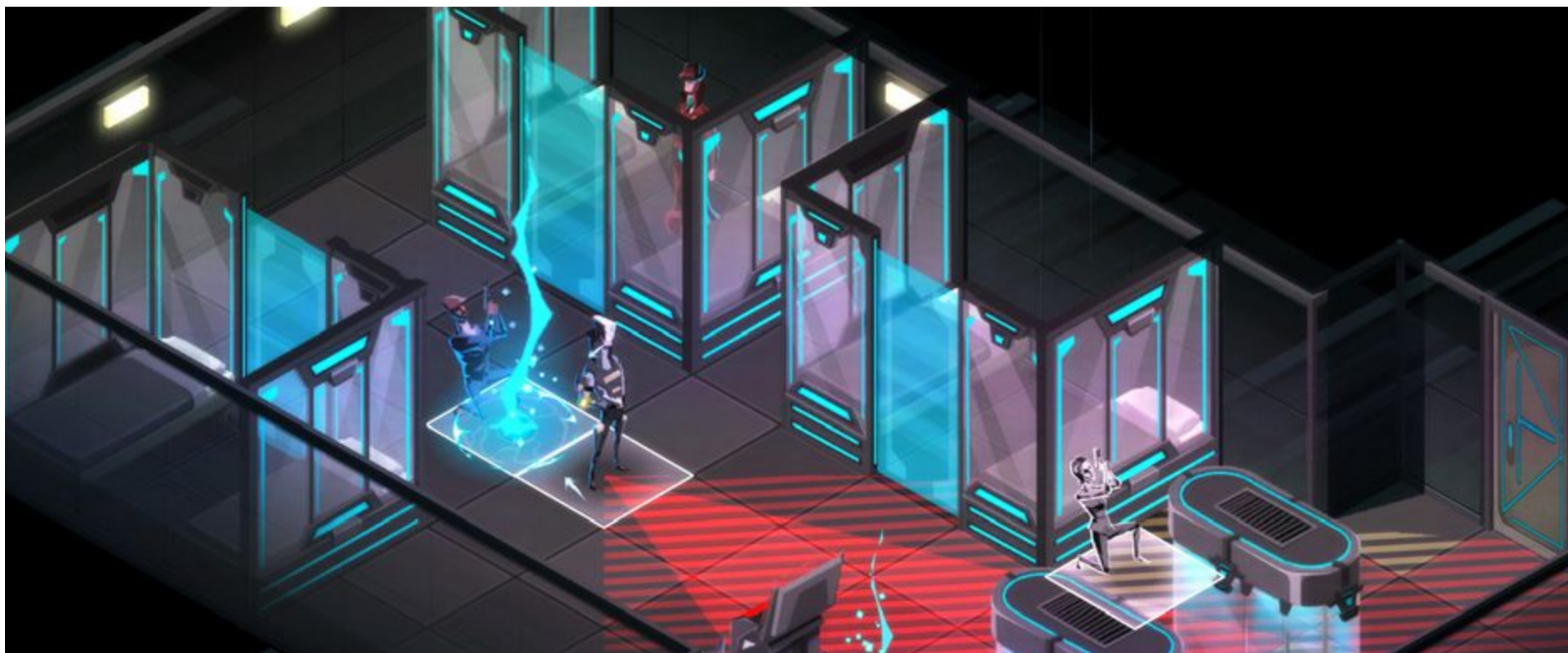


ANARCHY



SELECT A SKILL TO UPGRADE





narrative-driven game — the story is shite, yes, but there is some story —, and ironically, it is the one that suffers the most from Contingency Plan. It doubles up the length of the campaign up to 8 or 9 hours, increasing the difficulty of the missions accordingly. This transforms a rather demanding campaign to an extenuatingly laborious and utopian one. If the hardest difficulties were only achievable by those very dedicated players, now it's become downright impossible for the common folk, as there are twice as many occasions to mess it up. What's more, if you're as bad as me, you'll opt for the lowest difficulty, in which your agents are extremely overpowered and resourceful two thirds into the story. The last 3 hours of game are a

repetitive chain of levels that widen the gap more and more between you and the enemy, and thus reducing the challenge.

It seems to me that the main problem for this discrepancy in difficulties is the possibility of redoing a level, only available in the lowest. If an agent dies during a level, the game's difficulty ramps up, whereas if you can redo the level, the agent will more likely make it out alive and with juicier upgrades. Adding more and more content just accentuates these differences. All in all,

Contingency Plan doesn't fix any issues or break the game; rather, it seems to be more catered to those proficient at it, and that can take that leap of difficulty and crave a bigger and longer challenge. More content is always appreciated, but to me, it became a bit superfluous and 'too much'. However, I can acknowledge that it can either improve or worsen the game, depending on which end of the 'Type of Player' scale you stand. Personally, I just don't have the patience. ■

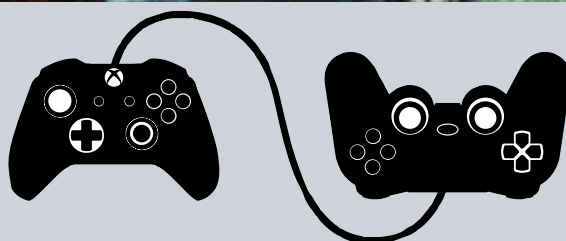


Contingency Plan DLC

5/10

Telltale's Game of Thrones Episode 6 Review

Publisher: Telltale Games
Developer: Telltale Games
Genre: Adventure
Platform: PC, PS3, Xbox 360



Release Dates
Out Now (Worldwide)

By Alex Hamilton



It feels like a long time since I first started playing Telltale's take on the phenomenon that is A Game of Thrones. Perhaps, like a person who has binge-watched the shows and then powered through George R. R. Martin's book series, I entered a wide-eyed innocent and emerged a brow-beaten veteran.

A Game of Thrones Episode 6: The Ice Dragon arrives almost a year after the first episode in the series popped up on my radar. Telltale, a company with which I had become familiar with thanks to their great Walking Dead series, were just beginning to stretch their creative wings (and court as many IPs as possible) when Game of Thrones Episode 1

arrived in my steam library. Episode 6 is much like the preceding five in the series, which you will be familiar with unless you're some form of sadist who likes to play games backwards. The new chapter features the same quick-time dialogue and action in a two-hour chapter that fans of Telltale will be familiar with.





Making a comeback, too, are the sort-of cel-shaded graphics that have made Telltale's previous titles stand out. Though many were unsure whether it could work in the grim and brutal world of Westeros (and Essos), Telltale have done a fine job in recreating the best-loved scenes and worlds from the television series. Characters are lovingly crafted to look almost identical to their television counterparts and are voiced superbly by their HBO actors. Telltale's own characters, too, created from their writers' imaginations, are so well steeped in the traditions of the lore that you half expect to see them crop up on the next season or in the next book.

It is a shame, then, that as the final credits of the game rolled by me I fell back into my chair with a disappointed sigh. The things that Telltale got so very right with this game feel so excellent that when things hit the rocks they hit them hard and with such force that your entire immersion (in what is a lovingly crafted world) is jilted.

As with previous iterations in the series, Episode 6 follows the trials and tribulations of the Forrester family. From the North and betrayed at the Twins by Walder Frey along with their king, Robb Stark. By this, the final episode of the seasons, the clan find themselves in

dire straits. Surrounded on all sides by enemies and pressed into almost defeat it's up to the player to try and wriggle them away from their impending doom.

A lot of loose ends are there to be tied by Episode 6 and it goes some way into ensuring that the story has a satisfying ending. The way these ends are tied, though, bring up a lot of the same complaints I had with the previous episode: not a lot of the decisions you make appear to have any consequence whatsoever.

Every character that you play as (who has survived up until

Telltale's Game of Thrones Episode 6

this episode) – whether naïve handmaiden Mira or loyal steward Gared Tuttle – seems to have had one key decision to make throughout the series. Apart from these key decisions, the ending is pre-determined. Sure, one character may like you while another dislikes you and an offhand comment here or there might differentiate your play through from your friend's but essentially the end is the same either way. Telltale have got better at disguising this fact in Episode 6, with a number of choices that change the way a

certain character acts or feels, but the result is still the same.

Some decisions are made with no real thought to outside possibilities. Faced with a battering ram at the gates, I was pressed to choose what to do to defend the Forrester's keep, Ironrath. The choices were to either brace the gate or get to cover from the arrows falling onto the walls. No option was given for attacking with fire arrows or something to disable the ram, leaving me frustrated. Another option later on, which

seems incongruous at first, turns out to change the entire ending for that character.

My ire can also be seen as a blessing in disguise. The reason I was so annoyed at many of these forced endings was that I truly cared for the outcome. I wanted the best for this cast of characters that I had gotten to know over a year with the series. Seeing them reduced to cannon fodder or tossed aside casually because it seemed inconvenient to the writers was more than





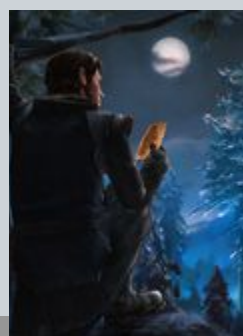
irritating. Then again, perhaps that is a well-intentioned mirror of the cut-throat world of A Game of Thrones?

Another factor to consider in this railroading of player endings is that Telltale are slightly more hampered by the progression of their story. Compared to The Walking Dead, where the team had the entirety of zombified America, with no canon or established lore to bump into, Westeros is a minefield of established characters, plot shields and timelines. With the ending of Episode 6 hinting at the now

confirmed second season, perhaps that will be the medium through which the writing team can flex their creative muscles with more freedom.

Telltale's A Game of Thrones: Episode 6 is a worthy, if slightly underwhelming, ending to the developer's first crack at the subject matter. Perhaps with some time and a little more

creative freedom they might be able to craft a truly open-ended story to satisfy even the most finicky of gamers. Despite this series not being the most free-flowing or player immersive, the developer can be proud of the way it has managed to bring George R. R. Martin's world to life in a way that no other videogame has managed so far. ■



Game of Thrones Episode 6



7.5/10

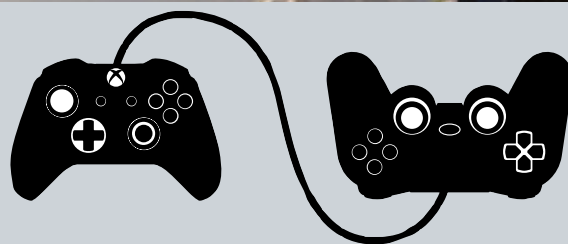
Just Cause 3 Review

Publisher: Square Enix

Developer: Avalanche Studios

Genre: Action-Adventure

Platform: PC, PS4, Xbox One



Release Dates

Out Now (Worldwide)

By Steven Dawson



That agent of the Agency, Rico Rodriguez is back to overthrow another dictator in this sequel to Just Cause 2 (funny, that). The third-person series is well known for its explosive... well, everything. They've been a big part of the previous games and explosions are a big part of this game, and from the opening five minutes it quickly becomes apparent that this will be no different.

Before you arrive in Rico's Mediterranean homeland peninsula of Medici, however, you have to contend with the most noticeable of Just Cause 3's issues: the loading times. Each time you load the game, you're treated to the logos of every company involved, followed by Rico sat on the beach. As the previous game had skippable logos, this is quite annoying. Then this, single-player only title forces you to wait for it to sign

in to the Square Enix servers before it will start or load your game. But wait, there's actually even more waiting!

Loading times are abominable, quite frankly, though they are a little bit faster if you disconnect the internet, as there is no way to play in offline mode otherwise. Some people have reported 15 minute load times, and I've personally experienced some that have been about

that. If you restart a challenge, for instance, you will also be forced to wait for a long time. Occasionally it will be short, but you would think "Set position of car to zero" would be a quick command for a AAA release to manage, but no: so try to make sure you don't hit a boulder and spin your sports car into the ocean. This is because of the leaderboards, which are a fun, but completely unnecessary addition to the game. They constantly update, so that you can find out how you compare against other people and those on your friends list. If you disable the extended leaderboards, it won't speed your load times up at all. The leaderboards are for challenges and feats -- such as races or drifting.

The challenges are things like races, firing ranges and destruction frenzies. They're fun distractions, and litter the landscape around each settlement. The feats seem like a way to force players to keep playing. Say, for instance, your friend managed to drift 1.2km, and you've only managed 68m, you will want to keep trying to drift further. The leaderboards allow you to post brags to

other players you have beaten, meaning you can digitally stick your tongue out at people.

Back to Medici -- Rico returns home, sneaking under the cover of night in a propeller plane with his friend Sheldon, after receiving word from his childhood friend that the country has a dictator in power -- General Di Ravello. He has been mining the islands for a mineral only found in Medici: Bavarium. Things go wrong from the outset, but Rico is soon joined by his old friend Mario, who is the leader of the rebellion movement. Unlike the previous game, there

is only one friendly faction, meaning most of the missions you get will be from either Mario or Dimah, the brains of the outfit. She upgrades your grappling hook and gives you the wingsuit which will usually be your fastest mode of conveyance. transportation As well as missions, you will come across random Encounters, and these range from having to get a grounded boat back into the water, or open a gate for someone, to kidnapping or rescues. These unlock certain items or priests which can remove your heat level.





The upgrade system is very different from the previous game, requiring you to get a certain amount of cogs (stars by any other name) in challenges. Getting more cogs allows you to unlock things like fine aim, faster grappling and longer grenade fuses.

Like the previous game, you are expected to free settlements of enemy forces to progress. This requires you to take down statues, destroy radar dishes, blow up fuel tankers and try to survive the tons and tons of enemies thrown at you for the slightest infraction of the law. Thankfully the missions aren't all the same as the last game. There is some repetition, of course, but rather than simply killing everything, some missions require you to hang back and provide covering fire, or you might have to defend a train, or maybe drive barrels of wine through a town.

The music during missions is very good, and adds to the charm with clear Mediterranean influences. The incidental music whilst you travel around, however, is very forgetful. Whilst clearing bases, I listened to other things. There are only

Just Cause 3

a certain amount of times you can hear Rico's new voice actor say the same handful of phrases as you blast apart radar domes. The script is funny during the story, such as near the start you get this exchange: "Rico, is it a you?" "It's a me. Mario?", but whilst wandering around the oneliners are grating.

The graphics are pretty, but being on console they aren't as breathtaking as they could be on a decked-out PC. There is some noticeable pop-up, especially when travelling at speed -- sometimes even trains appear out of nowhere. The main problem seems to be the frame rate though, which truly struggles on occasion. It's not as if it will only happen when you're looking at 50 explosions and eighty troops: I've had it happen when a handful of troops were shooting at me, and I turned away to get into a car. It was almost like watching PC footage of Batman: Arkham Knight before it was pulled from sale.

All of the vehicles look and control differently, which is a good thing given the size of some of them. The monster truck is actually on the small



side, when you consider the fact that you can pilot a plane with enough space inside it to carry three or four cars. However, the vehicle handling is very arcadey, given the physics engine's propensity to suddenly launch you into the air for no good reason. The handling whilst using the wingsuit isn't much better, even after many hours spent flying around the island chain.

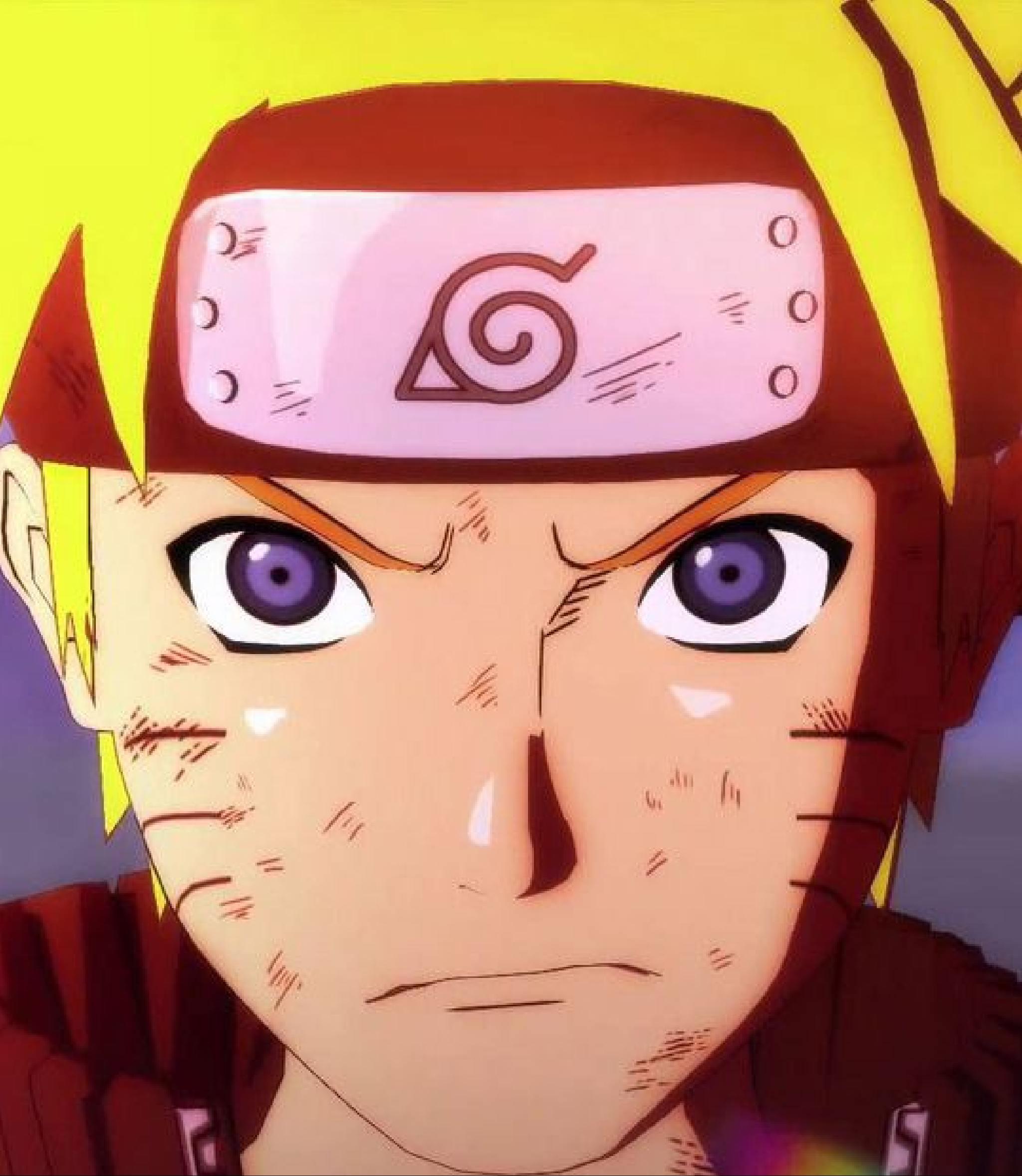
Although it has its issues, there is a lot of fun to be

had in Just Cause 3. There is plenty to do, as you only have to wait a moment to get an Encounter popping up, or use the closest race to get you over to another settlement, or you can go hunting for collectibles. This stops the space between settlements being too boring, which the previous title suffered from quite a bit. From madcap moments of destructible insanity, to a few heartwarming moments as you learn about Rico's past, this is a decent continuation of the series. ■



Just Cause 3

7/10



**Thanks for reading!
See you next month!**